

Identity Negotiation Among Javakheti Armenians

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Introduction

Javakheti Armenians are considered a marginal group according to the dominant post-Soviet Georgian narrative. Local population motives are mostly represented in terms of separatism and ethnic mobilization, and it is perceived that this group is contradicting and alienated from the Georgian national project, both to its ethnic (1991-1995) and civic forms (1995 to now). This is also discussed in scientific literature by different authors¹.

The dominant narrative loses the diversity of dispositions that exist in Javakheti. Information is scarce about the ways in which the ideas related to civic nationalism circulate in the Armenian population and how it comes together and interacts with the modern national project of Georgia. At this stage, we lack the resource to conduct a full-scale representative survey, which, using an in-depth qualitative interview method, can describe the ways of civic identity formulation in the whole Armenian community. Therefore, we established the limitation and selected research participants among 18-30-year-old youth whose secondary education is received within the post-Revolutionary period and who continued their education at Georgian Universities. Our choice was conditioned by two factors: within post-Revolutionary Georgia political elite had a clear focus on civic nationalism, and various educational programs were created, which should be understood as instruments promoting citizenship in the Georgian context. In addition, there were more opportunities to interact with the civic project for the youth that started interacting and socializing within the Georgian-speaking environment. Guided by this criterion, we contacted the graduates and students of Georgian Universities in Tbilisi and Akhaltsikhe, and using the random selection method, we recorded structured interviews with 8 of them.

How is the civic identity created and maintained by Javakheti Armenian youth when interacting with the modern Georgian national project? What is its response to the identity policies coming from the centre, and why? – by asking these questions, we try to test if there is a match between the identity concept offered by the political elites and perceptions of citizenship among the Armenian youth. Additionally, we try to assess the necessity and fairness of the existing dominant narrative about Javakheti.

The research period is delimited to years between 2003 and 2023. Although, to provide historical context, the period preceding it will also be shown. The first part of the paper explains the conceptual framework of nationalism and the models of nation; the second part demonstrates the interaction between Javakheti Armenians and the Georgian national project from a *Longue durée* perspective. The third part explains the processes involved in identity policy formation in the post-Soviet period. Last but not least,

¹Berglund, Christofer. Dragojevic, Marko & Timothy Blauvelt. Sticking Together? „Georgia’s “Beached” Armenians Between Mobilization and Acculturation.” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 27, no.2 (2021): 114-115. Metreveli, Tornike. „An undisclosed story of roses: church, state, and nation in contemporary Georgia.“ *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 5 (2016): 707. Kopeček, Vincenc. Trapped in informality? A study of informal politics in Georgia's Javakheti. *Caucasus Survey* 7, no.1 (2019): 67.

the paper analyses the civic identity formulation process among the research participants and critically analyses several aspects related to it, which in our opinion, must be paid attention to as facilitators of the identity formation process.

Civic nationalism and the models of nation

Fundamental principles of civic nationalism are inclusion, participation and openness². This conception, unlike ethnic nationalism, is not associated with hereditary or immune markers of identity but allows choosing nationality. Different scholars accentuate the fact that being with national boundaries is a symbolic process – a “daily referendum” that is subjected to personal choice³. Besides, the civic nation is represented as a political society, with its sovereign territories, economic interests, centralized institutions, shared culture and political principles⁴.

Despite the fact that scientific literature draws a strict line between civic and ethnic typologies, the imaginary boundary between the two is often violated in the nation-building process, and Anthony Smith says there are only a handful of countries with only one type of nationalism in it. Even within well-established democracies, social changes can challenge fundamental civic principles. Hence there are not only uniform but mixed ideologies too⁵.

Mixing civic and ethnic forms into one another is particularly striking in the post-Soviet countries. Local political elites, despite their numerous attempts, couldn't manage to free themselves from the Soviet legacy of nationalistic policies and defend the principles of civic nationalism, and this was made evident at different levels of nation-building. On the one hand, we had predecessors of the dominating societal groups, their myths, religion and other elements of ethnic nationalism happened to be central to the identity discourse⁶. On the other hand, non-formal governance – clientelism and clan connections, so typical to the Soviet Union, hasn't gone anywhere, it only transformed itself and continued its existence under democracy⁷.

These statements are relevant in the Georgian context too. As a state that has long existed under Empires and has a very short history of independence, it continues to battle between ethnic and civic ideas for several decades already. Since independence, Georgian political elite deemed ethnonationalism as the only way to nation-building. After political changes and changes in cadres, the political vector ethnonationalism switched from ethnical to civic nationalism, which is deemed as an official ideology up until now. Despite this, the identity discourse is still oriented toward the Georgian group, with no clear

²Smith, D. Anthony. *Nationalism and Modernism. A critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 210.

³Kristina Bakkaer Simonsen, Bart Bonikowski, “Is civic nationalism necessarily inclusive? Conceptions of nationhood and anti-Muslim attitudes in Europe,” *European Journal of Political research* 59, no. 1 (2020): 118.

⁴Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (England: Penguin Books, 1991), 9-11.

⁵Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism*, 212.

⁶Ronald G. Suny, “Contemporary Issues in Historical Perspective, Constructing Primordialism: Old Histories for New Nations,” *The Journal of Modern History* 73, no. 4 (2001): 877-878; Taras Kuzio, “History, memory and nation building in the post-Soviet colonial space,” *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 30, no. 2 (2002): 248.

⁷Stefes, Christoph H. *Understanding Post-Soviet Transitions Corruption, Collusion and Clientelism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 14.

focus on minorities. This is especially so when looking at history textbooks, which, besides official statements, are essential for observing the process of imagining a nation. As Ronald Suny says, it is precisely the historical narratives that help us understand what a nation has to say about itself.⁸ Besides, the Soviet clan governance style and clientelism remain a challenge, which is used by each new political elite group as leverage for controlling ethnic minorities.

Theoretical and empirical review brought in this paper allows us to make two assumptions: 1) civic nationalism, which represents the central ideology of post-Soviet elites in Georgia, starting from Shevarnadze rule up until now, is much different from the model that the state of Georgia is trying to achieve 2) in the nation-building process, Georgian political elites couldn't manage to create an inclusive environment and fully include minority groups in the identity discourse. In addition, minority interests were absolutely ignored and dismissed in the educational, political and economic dimensions. Due to this civic identity policy was reduced to a few simple topics such as learning a state language and loyalty towards the ruling party political elites.

In this paper, another side of the issue will also be discussed. According to us, when discussing identity creation, it is essential to consider that this 'work' has two sides – creators and recipients. The latter is not a passive participant to us. Different scholars point to the fact that within the conditions of civic nationalism, the identity concept is a matter of mutual agreement and besides political perception, it definitely entails citizen perceptions too.⁹ Due to this, we think that the Armenian group is an actor, just the same way as the Georgian political elite, because it is precisely the Armenian group that, daily, has to find its place in the national projects created by the centre and create its narrative while negotiating identity, and we know that these are not passive acts.

To study the formation of identity politics in different historical epochs, we will analyze historical papers, textbooks, official statements and research undertaken by non-governmental organizations. We will observe the responses of Armenian youth to post-Soviet identity politics and Armenian youth interactions with modern Georgian national projects using the method of interview analysis.

The concept of citizenship is understood more broadly by the Armenian youth than by government circles. But, as they tell us, attitudes towards citizenship are very diverse in the region. Part of the young people choose to accept the identity model offered to them by the centre due to their own social and economic interests and to stick to a few fundamental principles while selecting citizenship – talk the state language, be educated at a Georgian university, be loyal towards the ruling party political interests and obey to clan order. But those who say 'no' to this offer wish to interact with the national Georgia project through a more wide selection of civic ideas, such as by receiving a quality education, applying received education and finding employment opportunities, community activism, participating in cultural life, and achieving more tolerant and equal-rights society. Nonetheless, the voice of such youth remains ignored. Seeing their needs, sharing ideas coming from the bottom and introducing them to the political agenda is important for improving identity politics, overcoming the dominant narrative on Javakheti and for promoting the formation of an inclusive society.

⁸Suny, "Contemporary Issues in Historical Perspective," 870.

⁹Simonsen & Bonikowski, "Is civic nationalism necessarily inclusive?," 118.

Identity politics through the long-term historical perspective

Pre-Soviet period. Armenians are one of the oldest nations that have a long history of cohabitation with Georgians. In modern Georgia, we have Armenian settlements in Tbilisi, in Samtskhe-Javakheti, Kvemo Kartli, Adjara and Abkhazia. Their formation is connected to different historical periods.

According to Georgian historians, Armenians held leading positions in trade and craftsmanship. Due to this, middle age political elites fostered Armenian settlements in Georgia to empower the Georgian kingdom and principalities economically¹⁰. Historians also point out that after the Russian Empire showed up in South Caucasus, migrational processes were fully transferred under ‘Tsar’ control and became subject to his interests.¹¹

In 1828-29, after the war between Russia and the Ottoman Empire ended to the advantage of Russians, the Russian administration started transferring people to the newly added territories. The Christian religion was perceived as a central instrument, by the Empire servants, for cultivating loyalty. Georgian Muslims, whom the Russians would accuse of having pro-Turkish orientation, were resettled to Turkey, while their territories were filled with Christian Armenians brought from Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti territories such as Kars, Bayazet, Erzurum, Ardahan.¹² From the end of 19th century until the twenties of the 20th century, migration waves were created by harassment of Armenians by Ottomans. It is also worth mentioning that, after 1915 Armenian genocide¹³, Javakheti became a home for one part of the refugee population.¹⁴

The diverse nature of migration created its features of settlements. Armenians lived in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods in Tbilisi and other big cities. While in Javakheti, compact settlements conditioned a monoethnic environment. This impacted the dynamic of the interactions among different population groups. For example, there has never been an ethnic conflict between Georgians and Armenians, but unlike Armenians who lived in Tbilisi, they did not have the experience of positive relationships with one another. The creation of a barrier was fostered by the political situation. According to the political conjuncture of the Russian Empire, subjugated nations had to socialize in Russian culture.¹⁵ Georgian would remain an influential language, next to Russian in Tbilisi and big cities. This was so particularly after the second half of the 19th century when the Georgian national project was being formed. Since the 1860s, the Georgian national elite deemed the language, religion and territories to be the central elements of the national project,¹⁶ and from the 1880s, religion was replaced by the historical experience of cohabitation.¹⁷ Georgian

¹⁰Abashidze, Zviad. Dundua, Salome. *“he topics of ethnic and religious identities and the problems of civic integration in Georgia”* (Tbilisi: Intellect, 2009), 61.

Janiashvili, Lavrenti. *“The life and culture of the Armenina population of Samtskhe-Javakheti (a historical and ethnographic research)”* (Tbilisi: Academy of Science of Georgia, 1999), 10

¹¹ Abashidze and Dundua, *The topics of ethnic and religious identities*, 61.

¹² Ibid., 62.

¹³ Part of the international community recognizes this as a genocide, but others don’t.

¹⁴ Ibid., 91

¹⁵Suny, Ronald Grigor. *The Making of the Georgian Nation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 172.

¹⁶Chavchavadze, Ilia. „A few words on the translation of Kazlov’s “insane” by Revaz Eristavy Son of Shalva”, *Tsiskhari N4* (1861): 593.

¹⁷ Javakhishvili, Ivane. *Ilia Chavchavadze and the history of Georgia* (Tiflis: The publication of the Georgian branch of USSR Academy of Science 1938), 3.

nationalism of this period was underpinned by ethnicity. Despite the fact that liberal ideas were pretty strongly visible in the rhetoric of the Georgian national elites too,¹⁸ the nature of the national project was still exclusionary towards minorities. It was not clear about the participation opportunities for certain non-Georgian ethnic groups.

By this time, we don't have any fundamental study about the interaction between Javakheti Armenians and the Georgian national projects, but we can assume that the local population was marginalized and detached from processes taking place in Georgia. We have this assumption because, due to the region's mono-ethnicity, the Armenian community did not need to use the Georgian language. Besides this, the Georgian elite did not have a specific program directed at minorities, and there was never an opportunity for their incorporation. In addition, there was an informational vacuum and a lack of communication means. We should also consider that Armenians had their ethnic belongingness and the status of a citizen of the Russian Empire. Even if there had been such opportunities, inclusion in the Georgian national project probably wouldn't be interesting to them. Such configuration of the identity and the above-mentioned factors should have naturally conditioned their detachment from Georgian political, social and cultural reality.

Soviet period. The Democratic Republic of Georgia lived only three years. This time was not enough to introduce significant changes to identity politics. Soviet rule continued the style of the previous rule, only under cover of a different ideology. Marxism was the only true ideology for Bolsheviks, and it perceived nationalism as a transitional and old ideology.¹⁹ Nonetheless, it turned out to be profitable for Soviet leaders to manipulate national matters for the purpose of mobilizing the masses. They made nationalism serve the purpose of building a socialist state and started the national empowerment program for big and small groups. This process meant supporting territorial rights, language, culture and local elites.²⁰ In addition, they would assimilate non-Russian people into Russian cultural spaces. Russian language, Russian heroes and the myth of friendship with non-Russian nations became mainly promoted since the late-Stalinism period.²¹ It is also worth mentioning that until the demise of the Soviet Union, the very Russian language served as *lingua Franca*²², while Russians performed the role of 'Big Brother' in inter-ethnic communications.²³ Despite the fact that Javakheti did not receive the status of national autonomy, Soviet ethnic policies turned this place into a non-formal cultural autonomy and fostered its isolation and marginalization from the Georgian space.

The situation changed after Perestroika. From this very period, identity-related key questions started to arise among the local population. National sentiments were awoken among different ethnic groups

¹⁸ Chkhaidze, Irakli. From ethnic to civic nationalism: the dynamic of the national project in the post-Soviet Georgia. TSU, Doctoral thesis, 2016, pg. 32,

http://press.tsu.ge/data/image_db_innova/Disertaciebi/irakli_chxaidze.pdf (Seen on 30.01.2022).

¹⁹Ron Eyerman, „False Consciousness and Ideology in Marxist Theory,“ *Acta Sociologica* 24, no.1-2 (1981): 43.

²⁰Martin, Terry. *The Affirmative Action Empire. Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union 1923-1939* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 23, 151.

²¹Martin, Terry. “Modernization or Neo-traditionalism? Ascribed Nationality and Soviet Primordialism.” In. *Stalinism: New Directions*, edited by Sheila Fitzpatrick (London and New York, Routledge, 2000) 348-358

²²Slezkine, Yuri. The Soviet Union as a communal apartment, or how a socialist state promoted ethnic particularism, In *Stalinism: New Directions*, edited by Sheila Fitzpatrick (London and New York, Routledge, 2000), 313-347

²³Fitzpatrick, Sheila. Nationality as a Status. In *Stalinism: New Directions*, edited by Sheila Fitzpatrick London and New York, Routledge, 2000. 309-312.

simultaneously, conditioning conflicts on identity matters. Like other nations living in Georgia, Armenians also started questioning whether they see their place within the ethnonational Georgian state. In response to the raise of the Georgian national movement and the radical nationalist rhetoric, right before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Javakheti Armenians founded several national organizations, the most popular of which was Javakhk²⁴. Leaders of this organization would say that they aimed to defend the ethnic rights of minority groups and assist Karabakh Armenians.²⁵ But in this period, there was also a desire to create autonomy.²⁶

In the last years of the Soviet Union, tensions between ethnic groups were accompanied by fears of demographic threats in both groups. This period coincided with the foundation of the ‘Local Fund for Population Resettlement and Assistance’ by the activists of the Georgian national movement, and it was connected to the ideas of salvaging the Georgian nation. Later this organization was renamed after its main founder’s – Merab Kostava’s name. Members of this Fund prioritised the resettlement of Georgians into the border territories previously occupied by tight minority settlements. According to them, this would spare Georgia from separatist tendencies.²⁷ Houses emptied by Greek and Russian Dukhobors in Javakheti were being purchased following this organization’s initiative in 1989. Soon they started resettling Georgian Muslims from highland Adjara and other needy families into those houses.²⁸ Between 1989 and 1991, a total of 258 houses were purchased in regions, and 217 were in Ninotsminda. Nonetheless, only 68 houses maintained the new residents. One of the reasons for this was that this real estate was co-owned by the Fund even after the new settlers arrived to reside in them. The new residents couldn’t have bought off the property and disposed of it independently. Besides, new settlers used to prefer to leave the region due to the harsh climate in Javakheti, political instability and negative attitudes from locals.²⁹

Even though the resettlement of Georgian families in Javakheti did not lead to substantial changes to the ethnoreligious map³⁰, the Armenian population started to have problems with it. The founding of a nonformal organization, Farvana can also be understood as a demonstration of local protest. With support from international partners, Farvana leadership used to buy emptied houses in Javakheti for Armenian families in need so that Armenians wouldn’t leave the region and maintain the demography.³¹

Different factors that were mentioned above explain the disconnect there was between the groups during the Soviet Union, but after the collapse of the system, this was also augmented by a fear of losing one’s identity. This situation created distrust and a tense atmosphere for both in Georgians and Armenians. This crack in the group’s relationship widened after gaining independence, and there was little left to stabilise these relationships in a long run.

²⁴Georgian translation would be Javakheti. Founded in 1988.

²⁵Ter-Matevosyan, Vahram. Currie, Brent. ”A conflict that did not happen: revisiting the Javakhk affair in Georgia.” *Nations and Nationalism* 25, no.1 (2019): 349.

²⁶Cornell, Svante. *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus* (London and New York: Routledge 2006), 167.

²⁷ Trier, Tom. Turashvili, Medea. “Resettlement of Ecologically Displaced Persons; Solution of a Problem or Creation of a New? Eco-Migration in Georgia 1981 – 2006“ ECMI monographh №6 (Tbilisi, 2007): 14

²⁸ Лом, Хедвиг. “Джавахети после Революции роз: Прогресс и регресс в поисках национального единства в Грузии.” Рабочий доклад ЕСМІ №38 (Тбилиси, 2006):45.

²⁹ Trier & Turashvili, Resettlement of Ecologically Displaced Persons,14- 19.

³⁰Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, 64.

³¹Лом, “Джавахети после Революции роз,“ 45-46.

Identity politics in post-Soviet Georgia

Post-Soviet existence started with traumatic events in Georgia. Gamsakhurdia's government was not managing to rule the country in the backdrop of social changes – unemployment, a deficit of food, hygiene and other products, civil war and two territorial conflicts. Instead of communicating with minorities, the young leaders of independent Georgia would follow marginalization strategies. The national project was created on the exclusion principle. According to Stephen Johns, the first president of Georgia was trying to defend Georgian's rights and not suppress minorities. Nonetheless, the dissident past and the ethnonationalistic ideas drew Gamsakhurdia to a deadlock. In his project, there was no room left for non-Georgians.³² It is also worth mentioning that the protests among minorities lead to compromises too, and, for example, an ethnically Armenian person was assigned in Javakheti as a prefect.³³ But we must stay that compromises couldn't alter the situation. Communication was nonexistent, both on the level of elites and the population. Minorities were refusing to interact with the ethnicity project. Javakheti was shaped as a marginal space controlled by local non-formal organizations.³⁴

Things changed after Eduard Shevardnadze came into power. The first years of his rule were also loaded with traumatic events. Chaos and disorder were part of social life. Despite this, there were a few attempts to communicate with Javakheti Armenians. The major problem was the dialogue was taking place between politicians and local leaders, while the population was excluded from the nation-building process. The central government would grant political positions to Armenian leaders from Javakheti, buying loyalty and political silence in exchange. By these means, president Shevardnadze established his control over the region.³⁵ To strengthen political control, he united the Javakheti region with Samtskhe and created one administrative unit in 1994. Local organizations collected 18 000 signatures against the unification and presented it to the government in 1997, but Shevardnadze did not compromise. After one year, the pro-Russian leader of Adjara – Aslan Abashidze, offered the Armenian leaders of Javakheti to unite this region within the territories of Adjarian autonomy. His offer was rejected. Armenian leaders did not speak of their reasons for refusing publicly. What is interesting, researchers interested in Javakheti topic see Russian influence in Abashidze's offer.³⁶

Despite Shevardnadze's hierarchical and centrist strategy, shifts began in identity politics in this period. For example, legal amendments taking place then can be deemed as one of those. The law adopted in 1993 about citizenship did not require knowledge of state language or history to acquire citizenship. Law on education was allowing minorities to take education in their native language. During the court hearings, non-Georgians could use translation services, and language courses were also created. All of these indicated shifts in the national project and the emergence of civic ideas,³⁷ but open questions remained. For example, identity discourse was one of those issues. In the Georgian historical narrative of this period, historians

³²Johns, Stephen. "Georgia: Nationalism from under the Rubble." In *After Independence: Making and Protecting the Nation in Postcolonial and Postcommunist States*, edited by Lowell Barrington (USA: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 248-276.

³³Wheatley, Jonathan. "The Integration of National Minorities in the Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli provinces of Georgia." EMCI Working Paper #44 (Tbilisi, 2009): 26.

³⁴Wheatley, Jonathan. "Managing ethnic diversity in Georgia: one step forward, two steps back." *Central Asian Survey* 28, no. 2 (2009):123.

³⁵Лом, "Джавакети после Революции роз," 14.

³⁶Ter-Matevosyan, Brent, „A conflict that did not happen,” 13.

³⁷Johns, "Georgia: Nationalism from under the Rubble," 260.

would only emphasize Georgian groups,³⁸ which made the inclusion principle nonviable. In addition, locals were fully excluded from the nation-building process, both on political and economic levels. Clan rule developed a very passive political culture among the Armenian population. Only a few people negotiating with the central government would take decisions on their behalf. Administrative resources were also in their hands.³⁹ For Javakheti residents, a significant source of subsistence was agriculture and the jobs created by the Russian military base.⁴⁰ Hence they developed an affinity towards such an international vector that was not in the interests of Georgia. Besides, state language programs were not working efficiently due to a shortage of personnel and low qualifications. For a very long locals wouldn't understand why Georgian was established as the only language for administrative proceedings, as the region never needed this language. But, we have to say that the state compromised on this and would turn a blind eye when Armenian was kept being used for administrative proceedings.⁴¹

The problems mentioned above were augmented by a lack of communication means – infrastructure, Georgian press, radio or television, that would help the citizens to communicate with the rest of Georgia. Javakheti population was entirely disconnected from the Georgian state and the cultural, economic and political processes taking place there. Kopeček is fair in his description that despite not having autonomy, local Armenians lived in a nonformal autonomy.⁴² In light of this marginalization, they were trying to defend their interests and founded new organizations “Virky”⁴³ and “Jemm”⁴⁴, whose main aim was to lobby political autonomy in Javakheti and keep the Russian military base there.⁴⁵

The locals were voicing issues tightly connected to economic and social factors. Social discontent was rising in Javakheti due to the harsh climate, lack of employment, and high competition for resources. The centre hadn't thought about the aims and motives of the local population from a social perspective. Due to the experience in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region (South Ossetia), Georgians saw separatism in the Armenian resistance. Javakheti was perceived as a potential conflict zone until the end of the Shevardnadze rule.

Identity politics changed significantly after the Rose Revolution. Mikheil Saakashvili, who took the post of the President of Georgia having a pro-Western nation-building program, introduced significant legislative changes. By the Organic Law of Georgia, starting in 2004, new state symbols were introduced (a flag, anthem, coat of arms), clearly depicting the country's motto “Strength is in unity”. Next to these symbolic modifications, Saakashvili's rhetoric has repeated not once that all ethnic minorities were inseparable from the Georgian state and equal citizens.⁴⁶ In 2006, the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities was ratified. In 2009, the National Concept for Tolerance and Civic

³⁸ Asatiani, Nodar. History of Georgia IX grade textbook (Tbilisi: Ganatleba, 1995).

³⁹Kopeček, Trapped in informality?, 66-67.

⁴⁰Wheatley, “Managing ethnic diversity,” 126.

⁴¹Kopeček, Trapped in informality?, 66.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³Founded at the end of the 1990s.

⁴⁴Founded in 2001 and in translation, it means the young sports union of Javakheti.

⁴⁵Wheatley, “The Integration of National Minorities,” 26.

⁴⁶ Blauvelt, Timothy. Berglund, Cristopher. “Armenians in the Making of Modern Georgia.” In *Armenians in Post-Socialist Europe*, edited by Konrad Siekierski & Stefan Troebst, 69-85 (Köln: Böhlau, 2016).

Integration was approved. In addition, the Office of the State Minister of Integration Affairs created a delegation in Akhalkalaki, and a local person was appointed as the head of it.⁴⁷

The fact that there were attempts to improve communication was also evident, as Georgian media attention was spared on Javakheti. Elections and political and educational events were now getting media coverage. Besides, several shows started to be translated into Armenian. Despite all, as the surveys have shown, by the end of the 2000s, Georgian media was watched by around 25% of the local population.⁴⁸ One reason was that the local population did not know Georgian; however, access to Georgian media was not free of charge for them.⁴⁹

Beyond legal and informational spheres, transportation means started to be re-established, infrastructure was fixed⁵⁰, additionally, educational programs were created, one of which was the language program⁵¹ called “Georgian Language for the Future Success”, also the “Georgian as the Second Language” program and “1+4”, that allowed minorities to take admission exams in their native language.⁵² Besides, for standardizing education, the state started translating textbooks into the Armenian language,⁵³ these reforms opened a window of opportunity for locals, creating a desire among the youth to continue their education in Tbilisi. It was one of the major achievements that a new history textbook was created. Their authors were no more focused only on Georgians in the Georgian state-building, and they would show the role of different ethnic groups in the Georgian state-building.⁵⁴

Despite these positive changes, there were errors in the reform process. Georgian language lessons started without adequate training for local cadres. Subject level qualifications of teachers’ could not satisfy language-teaching standards. Besides, school textbooks were ineffective for pupils of different levels. For example, the textbook materials did not give the higher-grade students factual knowledge and did not allow them to cover the school program fully. Besides, state scholarship for Armenian graduates was issued in limited numbers, and many stayed without resources.⁵⁵ Besides, the new vector of relationships between the centre and local communities expressed mutual distrust. Armenians perceived the fast integration demands as threats of losing ethnic identity and language, an example of this was the protest they had towards studying Georgian history at schools. Locals demanded that Armenian schools preserve Armenian history as an elective course. The state met this demand unprepared. Armenian history was maintained as a school subject, but it was not made possible to write textbooks in Georgia. Due to this, for several years schools would use books arriving from Yerevan,⁵⁶ and later the teaching of this subject was fully cancelled.

⁴⁷ Метревели, Екатерина. Ключевые тенденции в системе управления в Джавахети. *Джавахети вызовы и перспективы* (Тбилиси: Грузинский фонд стратегических и международных 2013), 8.

⁴⁸ Жвания, Ирина. Абашидзе, Тамара. Китиашвили, Анастасия. Опрос населения Джавахети «Барометр 2013». *Джавахети вызовы и перспективы* (Тбилиси: Грузинский фонд стратегических и международных 2013), 30.

⁴⁹The information is recorded in 2012, during a field work in Javakheti by Ketevan Epadze.

⁵⁰ Лом, “Джавахети после Революции роз,” 8-9, 40.

⁵¹Метревели, Екатерина. Ключевые тенденции, 9..

⁵²Metreveli, “An undisclosed story of roses,” 707.

⁵³Wheatley, “The Integration of National Minorities,” 13.

⁵⁴ Malazonia, David. Kvitashvili, Nino. *Malazoniam Tamar. Hisotry of Georgia (textbook)* (Tbilisi: Biographical Centre, 2008), 21.

⁵⁵ This was observed by the co-athor of this paper, Ketevan Epremadze, during her field works in Javakheti in 2011 and 2015.

⁵⁶ Лом, “Джавахети после Революции роз.” 33.

In addition, there was resistance towards using state language too.⁵⁷ Part of the population who attained secondary and higher education during the Soviet Union or in the 1990s would use Armenian and Russian as their everyday communication language. Learning a new language was perceived as a problem, Armenians would object that the Georgian language would be used as the criterion to preserve a job, and they offered the state a couple of solutions: either to establish the Armenian language as an administrative language in Javakheti or introduce a transitional period with the duration of 15-20 years. According to the locals, if the second option was agreed upon, the mentioned period would be enough to overcome the language barrier.⁵⁸

Assessment of the attitudes toward the reforms in the region shows that locals perceived it as assimilation to interact with the Georgian national project,⁵⁹ and saw themselves as victims of state policies.⁶⁰ Their only self-defence leverage was assistance from Russia, whose military bases were in Javakheti until 2007. It is important to note that in the 2000s, there were several active organizations that were working on autonomy in this region. This demand was supported by part of the population for whom Russia was safeguarding security with its military bases and was the major economic income source.⁶¹

The protest in Javakheti and resistance towards reforms was straightforwardly interpreted in the centre. The Georgian political elite, firmly confronting Russia and considering Georgia its prey, did not receive the desires of Javakheti Armenians of Russian support with tolerance. Russian presence in the relationship between these two groups lit the red alerts. Social discontent existing among the minorities was connected to the security dilemma. As Laurence Broers justly notes, this was labelled as separatism in Georgian media, academic circles and among national actors.⁶²

The image of separatism was endorsed by the fact that since the closure of the Russian military base, part of the population lost employment places, and a growing number of them would leave for Russia. Locals became seasonal migrants to the country officially acclaimed as an enemy. It is worth noting that after the war with Georgia, Russia simplified citizenship procedures and a lot of Armenians benefited from it.⁶³ This grew distrust towards the group.

The government created new clan groups and reinforced the work of defence organs in the region to attain loyalty from the Armenian population.⁶⁴ The government invented a populist strategy to punish the disobedient part of the population. An image of a “Bad” Armenian was activated after the crisis in external relations and deteriorating relationships with Russia, creating an atmosphere of fear. We can bring Vahagn Chakhalyan’s case as one example. This person's eccentric character and radical acts also contributed to carving out a “Bad Boy” image from the Armenian activist. He was a founder of the organization called United Javakheti and a supporter of maintaining Russian military bases in the region. In 2006 Chakhalyan attacked an election committee and participated in a demonstration objecting to the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 37.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 38.

⁶⁰Broers, Laurence. “Filling the Void: Ethnic Politics and Nationalities Policy in Post-Conflict Georgia.” *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 36, no. 2 (2008): 289.

⁶¹Ter-Matevosyan, Brent, „A conflict that did not happen,” 18.

⁶²Broers, “Filling the Void,” 289, 293

⁶³“If you want citizenship, study Georgian”– President about the restoration of citizenship to ethnic Armenians <https://sknews.ge/ka/old/22216>, (Seen on 27.12.2022).

⁶⁴ Kopeček, Trapped in informality?, 69.

closure of Russian military bases.⁶⁵ According to Armenian activists, his actions were directed towards defending minority rights: “We want stability, not war. My wife is Georgian, why do I need a conflict? We had a chance to separate in the 90s but we did not use this chance” – says Chakhalyan.⁶⁶

The social motive behind the political protest and trust towards Russia stayed unnoticed in the centre. Chakhalyan’s activism was deemed separatism, and in 2008 he was detained under the charges of illegal weapon possession, together with his family members, father and brother.⁶⁷ He became a popular “Bad Armenian” not only on the local scale but country-wide. At the prison, Chakhalyan said that with its integration demands, the state was oppressing Javakheti Armenians and dividing them into groups loyal to government demands and disobedient ones. While his goal was to avoid this division and defend minority rights.⁶⁸ Court ignored his statements and complaints about the falsification of evidence. In 2013, Chakhalyan was pardoned and released from prison.⁶⁹ But it is interesting that after the release he changed the field of his activism and moved from Javakheti to Yerevan.⁷⁰

The Georgian Dream started its rule by having ethnonationalist rhetoric. Javakheti population was critical towards Bidzina Ivanishvili, the founder of the party that won the elections in 2012, interview in which he said: “*Your homeland Armenia is nearby. It is hard to understand for me. I used to live in France, in the USA, but I always seeing my village in my dreams*”.⁷¹ There were negative reactions to this statement in Yerevan as well. The Chairman of Foreign Relations of the Parliament of Armenia, Artak Zakaryan, note that Ivanishvili’s phrase stood for a continuation of “Georgia for Georgians” policies. To avoid disputes with neighbours and remove internal tensions, the party press service had also to make a statement and say that the words of the Georgian Dream leader were wrongly interpreted.⁷² Following this incident, questions of the country’s dominant ideology temporarily vanished from the public space.

President Giorgi Margvelashvili backed by the "Georgian Dream" party, did not make statements about the Javakheti Armenians during his term in office, however, the next president Salome Zourabishvili had been appeared in an awkward situation several times due to her own speeches.

But this topic was back in the centre of attention on October 2, 2018. President of Georgia, Salome Zourabishvili, made a discriminatory statement at a meeting in Ninotsminda with the gathered population. According to her, the third president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, “issued too many citizenships to Turkish people” but left Armenians living in Georgia without citizenship.⁷³ With these populist statements, she tried to manipulate with attitudes of locals and direct aggression towards the opposition that ruled the

⁶⁵ Лом, “Джавахети после Революции роз,” 17,21.

⁶⁶ Лом, “Джавахети после Революции роз,” 50

⁶⁷ Метревели, Ключевые тенденции, 15.

⁶⁸ Sheshabidze, Ana. „Vahagn Chahalyan under the threat of liquidation”, *Human Rights Ge*, 13 August 2009, <http://www.humanrights.ge/index.php?pid=7783&lang=geo> (Seen on 27.12.2022).

⁶⁹ Метревели, Ключевые тенденции, 15.

⁷⁰ Liklikadze, Koba. “Vahagn Chahalyan in the vanguard of Pashynian opponents”. *Radio Liberty*, 11 November 2020, shorturl.at/oBEI4 (Seen on 27.12.2022).

⁷¹ „The Armenian Weekly: “We should give Javakheti Armenians the opportunity to raise their children as Armenians!” *Kviris Palitra*. 8 February 2013. <https://kvirispalitra.ge/article/15628-the-armenian-weekly-gjavakhethis-aghordzinebis-perspeqtivebiq/> (Seen on 27.12.2022).

⁷² Avaliani, Dimitry. „'Desired' neighbouring relations.” *Tabula*, 1 March 2013. <https://tabula.ge/en/news/551912-saotsnebo-mezobloba> (Seen on 27.12.2022).

⁷³ „Salome Zourabishvili’s statement was assessed as xenophobic”, *Radio Liberty*, 4 October 2018. <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/29525248.html> (Seen on 30.01.2023).

country before. The dual citizenship rule was revoked in Georgia in 2013 after the Georgian Dream came into power. After this, Javakheti residents, sustaining themselves with seasonal migrations to Russia due to a lack of jobs, started having many problems. According to Radio Liberty, up to 2800 Armenians living in Javakheti learned of their revoked citizenship only when crossing the border.⁷⁴

It is also worth mentioning that Zourabishvili's statement, besides populism, contained historic nuances too. Official Armenia has an ongoing dispute with Turkey about recognising the Armenian genocide. Due to this, there still are conflicts between these groups. 15 non-governmental organizations condemned President's words, considering the historical context and legal nuances. According to them, the speech of October 2 contained attempts to incite conflict between different ethnic groups and violation of the equality principle.⁷⁵

The new textbooks of history also challenged the political principles of civic nationalism, which were introduced in 2012 and were in use in public schools in the years after. In the authors' narratives emphasis was back on the Georgian ethnic group, and minority participation in Georgian nation-building was ignored.⁷⁶

It can be assessed at the new Government's positive step that the division between *good* and *bad* Armenians has not appeared in public discourse any more. Nonetheless, there were no substantial changes to identity politics from 2012 to now. Georgian Dream continues the education policies of the previous government. The programs incepted in the 2000s still exist, and their fruitful results demonstrate that the number of those willing to study in Tbilisi has grown, and knowledge of the Georgian language has improved among the youth. Nartsis Karapetyan, head of the Akhalkalaki Resource Center, assessed the dynamic of learning the Georgian Language positively in her 2015 interview: *"For years, learning the Georgian language was optional for students, they would attend the lessons only if they desired so, but if not, they would skip them. Such an approach and nonprofessionalism lead us to minorities living in Georgia not knowing the state language. But in the past few years, the situation has changed positively. This is demonstrated in the levels of Akhalkalaki pupil participation in different intellectual competitions."*⁷⁷

There are still challenges in the process of teaching the language. Publication of bilingual history textbooks, where a little part of the information is in Armenian, and a big part is in Georgian, can be deemed as one of the errors. This is a problem for local history teachers as many don't know Georgian.⁷⁸ One another big issue is related to 1+4 programs. Learning Georgian is funded by the state budget for part of the students belonging to each ethnic minority group based on General Skills exam scores. Vulnerable

⁷⁴ Ivelashvili, Maia. "Why can't Armenians born in Georgia restore citizenship?" *Radio Liberty*, 19 April 2019 [shorturl.at/jtLV3](https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/29525248.html) (Seen on 30.01.2023).

⁷⁵ „Salome Zourabishvili's statement was assessed as xenophobic", *Radio Liberty*, 4 October 2018. <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/29525248.html> (Seen on 30.01.2023).

⁷⁶ Janelidze, Otari. Tabuashvili, Apolon. Tavadze, Leri. Iremashvili, Nana. *History of Georgia. IX grade textbook* (Tbilisi: Klio, 2012).

Ot'ar Janelidze et al., *Sak'art'velos istoria: IX klasi* (Tbilisi: klio 2012)

⁷⁷ An interview with Nartsis Karapetyan recorded in May of 2015 in Javakheti, in the frames of Mestr's thesis research by Ketevan Epadze and Davit Chikadze.

⁷⁸ History of Georgia in semi-Armenian textbooks, *JNEWS*, 16 March 2022. <https://ka.jnews.ge/?p=22576>, (Seen on 03.01.2023).

groups stay uneducated as they don't have the resources to finance their education, pay rent in Tbilisi, and cover everyday living costs.⁷⁹

Learning the Georgian language is still a challenge for part of the population who sees no need to speak Georgian while living in a monoethnic environment and believes it is a discriminatory requirement to demand learning Georgian. They criticize the Government for reducing integration to the language component and believe citizenship must entail other civic responsibilities, rights and obligations beyond knowing the language. In the interview recorded in 2015, Samvel Petrosyan, at that time, Akhalkalaki delegate from an opposition party, would say: *"A very little while ago, there was an initiative in the Parliament to adopt a law on the protection of state language. This is a populist law, that compels people to run away from here. Language is the most important in Georgia now. Let's say I am a good surgeon, but I don't know Georgian. They tell me: you can't work if you don't know the state language! It is better if I am a bad surgeon and harm people, but I have to know Georgian well. This barrier has to be removed somehow, professionalism must come first"*.⁸⁰

Salome Zourabishvili's speech in 2019 on Javakheti also resonates with the reduction of citizenship to the language component. On April 14, at an event celebrating the state language, the president visiting Javakheti underscored her initiative about returning dual citizenship and said: *"Everyone has the right to return and restore Georgian citizenship. You must make one little step for this, which means if you want this country's citizenship, it is required to learn this language at least to such a level that you pass that little exam that is part of the citizenship restoration process. This is symbolic, but at the same time, it means a lot. This means that Georgian wants you to become full-fledged citizens."*⁸¹

The review of ongoing processes in the post-Soviet period shows that despite choosing civic nationalism as one's official ideology and despite the successful reforms associated with it, there are still significant challenges on the way to establishing the civic model of a nation. The idea of citizenship is limited to a few narrow topics in the identity politics of the centre, and it doesn't include such important aspects as economic and social security and participation in political and cultural processes. Due to the reductionist views, the political elite doesn't see the needs of ethnic groups and doesn't consider the fact that they create absolutely different identity narratives on a daily life level. It is crucial and essential to integrate this narrative into the national project. Otherwise, the identity vector will only be pointed from top to down, and the idea of citizenship will stay formal and aimless in the practical life of minorities.

⁷⁹Tagazyan, Tigran. "1+4" is one of the most successful state programs." *Social Justice Center*, 14 February 2022. <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/1-4-ert-erti-tsarmatebuli-sakhelmtsifo-programaa> (Seen on 03.01.2023).

⁸⁰ An interview with Samvel Petrosyan recorded in Javakheti, in May of 2015, for a Master's research by Ketii Epadze and Davit Chikadze.

⁸¹Ivelashvili, Maia. "Salome Zourabishvili in Samtskhe-Javakheti: main accents". Radio Liberty, 14 April 2019, shorturl.at/flOT9 (Seen on 30.01.2023).

The youth in the process of negotiating identity

We recorded structured interviews with Javakheti Armenian youth in the period of 6-18th of January. Their ages fall between 18 and 30. 4 respondents are from Ninotsminda, and 4 from Akhalkalaki. We were curious to ask about their interpretation of the identity concept offered by the centre from the everyday life perspective and how do these ideas match their perceptions of citizenship. Two topics were selected as the centre's ideas: 1) knowledge of a state language. The relevance of this topic is noticed by education programs and the emphasis politicians put on it. 2) Loyalty towards the ruling party's political interests, which entails obedience to the ruling party. This matter is connected to the security dilemma and clan order in the perspectives of the centre and is also part of the dominant narrative.

The interviews showed that the understanding of citizenship is wider among our respondents than the ideas proposed by the centre and encompasses such topics as receiving a quality education, application of received education and employment, community activism, participation in cultural life, and living in a tolerant and equal society. The respondents believe that the government's appeal "Speak Georgian" and "Don't be a Separatist" devaluates the idea of citizenship and doesn't cover all the issues that being part of a state and of a civic nation should entail. Nonetheless, respondents also say that due to limited access to resources, clan rule and isolation in the Javakheti region, only a little segment of young people tries to defend their understanding of citizenship, and others agree with propositions from the centre – that means they study Georgian and are passive in different spheres of life (Table 1. Shows the difference and convergences between various ideas associated with citizenship)

Table 1. Communication between the ideas of citizenship	
The ideas of the centre	The ideas of the youth
<i>Citizens are those who speak Georgian</i>	<i>To become a citizen Georgian language is essential but not sufficient</i>
<i>The citizen must obey to clans in his region, that is conducive of ruling party interests and clan order</i>	<i>Principles of citizenship must be above clan order, take interest in community activism, and try to bring changes to the region</i>
<i>The citizen must not be loyal to Russian interests, shouldn't demand separation of Javakheti</i>	<i>Separatism is the image they created in Tbilisi. Javakheti Armenians travel to Russia due to unemployment. The idea of creating autonomy is no more relevant</i>
-	<i>Citizens should have the possibility to take quality education in their own country</i>
-	<i>Citizens should be able to get employed in their own country</i>
-	<i>Citizens must live in an environment of tolerance and equal rights</i>
-	<i>Citizens must have the rights to participate in the cultural life of a state</i>

According to the respondents, every resident of Javakheti knows that knowing the language is an important part of integration for the state. While they think that it is a significant part of identity, they think it is not enough. Nonetheless, due to existing requirements, knowledge of the Georgian language and the number of those interested in Georgian universities has significantly grown. Katya Ananikyan has said: *“More people are coming to Tbilisi now. This was not like this before. No one would come to Tbilisi. Everyone used to go to Yerevan. But not now. Very few may go to Armenia only because they don’t know Georgian. Or go to Russia. Also because of the language”*.⁸² Lilit Karapetyan had a special opinion. She thought that youth approaches vary. Despite the fact that the number of those coming to Georgia has grown, there are still many young people who take education at Armenian universities due to not knowing the state language and employment barriers: *“Many young people are coming to Tbilisi from my village, since 2010, when the 1+4 program started. But 80% from my neighbouring village goes to Yerevan for education because they think it is better to take education in their language.”*⁸³

Respondent views are confirmed by the public information provided by LEPL Education Management Information System. It shows that since the 1+4 program started, between 2012 and 2022, the number of Armenian students was constantly growing (Table 2. Shows the exact numbers).⁸⁴

Table 2. Armenian minority representative admitted in the “1+4” program

Admission year	Without scholarship	With scholarship	Total # admitted
2010	6	82	88
2011	72	119	191
2012	80	114	194
2013	67	89	156
2014	88	88	176
2015	76	89	165
2016	120	91	211
2017	175	93	268
2018	197	90	287
2019	244	89	333
2020	128	92	220
2021	170	91	261
2022	260	92	352
Total # of admissions	1683	1219	2902

To our respondents, knowledge of the Georgian language is connected to professional development and personal life arrangements. Karen Okroyan said: *“You must definitely know the Georgian language to get employed here. I don’t think there is any resistance [towards learning the language]. My peers study the language, those older than me know Georgian well, as I know.”*⁸⁵ Vova Karapetyan had a similar

⁸² An interview with Katya Ananikyan, recorded on 11th of January 2023 by Ana Tivadze in Tbilisi.

⁸³ An interview with Lilit Karapetyan.

⁸⁴ LEPL Education Management Information System. Letter NMES 9 23 0000077203, 25.01.2023.

⁸⁵ An interview with Karen Oroyan recorded on 12th of January 2023 by Ana Tivadze in Tbilisi.

opinion too: *“Every citizen of Georgia must know the state language. I am a citizen of Georgia, too and I need the language to live, work and study in this country”*.⁸⁶

It is worth noting that part of the respondents are critical of the opportunities they have for receiving quality education and believe that citizenship is not only about fulfilling one’s obligations, it also means having rights, including quality education, to the application of the received education and employment.

The following issues were identified as problems with quality education:

1) There is a lack of professional cadres in the Javakheti region. This is particularly noticeable in the case of Georgian language specialists. Schools employ local cadres who don’t know Georgian well. Part of them doesn’t even have adequate qualifications. The school is not managing to resolve the issue of teachers because the centre sends them only one teacher per year within the frames of the state program. These teachers are not managing to work with all groups and some pupils don’t have the opportunity to learn the state language from the Georgian-speaking teacher. Lillit Karapetyan said: *“I used to get 10 in Georgian language class until the 8th grade by only knowing how to say ‘mother’, ‘father’, ‘grandpa’. The teacher of Georgian was Armenian. S/he only knew a few words. During the Soviet Union, s/he had interactions with Georgians, s/he was in the army, knew a few words and pretended to teach us. [...] after 8th-grade Georgian language teachers arrived and since I really loved my teacher, I also started to love the language and learned it.*”⁸⁷

2) No communication with the Georgian-speaking environment creates a significant barrier for Armenian youth. Even when students learn the language from professional cadres, their language competencies are not developing as they don’t get to use the state language outside the school. Gohar Arjoyan said: *“We did not have relations with Georgians at all. As you know, there are almost no Georgians in Ninotsminda. This means we haven’t had any contact or communication. So I greatly fell in love with this girl [the language teacher from Tbilisi]. She was a very polite, good, kind teacher, just the way I wanted and imagined a teacher in my thoughts. We started to study, and she would teach us the Georgian language after classes. Slowly, slowly, I started to like the Georgian language, then she would also tell us interesting facts about Georgian history. It was precisely in 8th-9th grades that I started developing the desire to continue my education in Georgia. Because let’s say, the whole of Georgia became interesting at this point. Prior to this, I did know that I lived in Georgia, but I did not know what Georgia was like, what the Georgians were like, and how to have relations with them.*”⁸⁸

3) Big part of the Armenian youth are unable to take higher education due to education fees, the quotas existing in the language program and high prices in the urban areas. Despite the fact that institutional support is little in this regard, and won’t cover all groups, part of the youth still tries to fight for a better future and face the challenges. Ekaterine Kapalyan shared her thoughts about the problems of Armenian students: *“locals are mainly occupied with agriculture and land harvesting. They don’t have a good income for everyone to afford to send their child to university. It was pretty hard in our times, fewer people would go to Tbilisi. The majority would go to Armenia because they knew Armenian and had relatives there too. Initially, it was two of us, it was very difficult to rent an apartment, we couldn’t work, and we were fully dependent on our parents. Then we became three and later four who would live together. Those coming from Javakheti used to do it so to make it financially easier. It is still very difficult, though. If one family spends 400 Lari here, 400 Lari is nothing for one student in Tbilisi. If the student doesn’t have a scholarship,*

⁸⁶ An interview with Vova Karapetyan recorded on 18th of January 2023 by Ketevan Epadze online.

⁸⁷ An interview with Lilit Karapetyan recorded on 12th of January 2023 by Ana Tivadze in Tbilisi.

⁸⁸ An interview with Gohar Aghjayan was recorded on 12th of January 2023 by Ana Tivadze in Tbilisi.

*the education fee must also be covered, and apartment rent and how should one live?*⁸⁹ Ekaterine managed to cope with problems with her strong willpower, personal motivation and goal-orientedness, and she successfully earned a Bachelor's degree while she continues to study in a Master's program at Ilia University. But some students are unable to cope with barriers and are compelled to give up on their goals halfway: *"When continuing education after the prep-year, we still face a lot of challenges. Some discontinue studying after the first two months, return to Javakheti, or go to Armenia," Gohar Aghjoyan told us.*⁹⁰

Another significant problem that Armenian youth face daily is applying received education and getting employed, which hugely challenges their idea of citizenship. Several problems were identified related to employment:

1) There is a distrust towards minorities in Urban areas. But Armenian youth have various experiences during their work relations in the Georgian-speaking environment. Due to this, Georgian society is not portrayed in a homogenous discriminatory image, and the reactions of Armenian youth are situational. Most respondents abstained from talking about this issue, which might indicate that they don't want to damage the image of potential employers. Ekaterine Kapalyan briefly noted that her friends had faced discrimination,⁹¹ while Johar Aghjoyan spoke of his personal experience: *"I have heard that people can't find jobs due to their nationality. I haven't heard of such facts from my friends after employment. But while job searching, sometimes they look at us as aliens. Such a thing happened to me once. As if we might lack capacities and might not do something quite as needed. But, as we start, we are actually good at it. Since we know they look at us differently, we try to do everything twice and three times better".*⁹² The research of the Center of Civil Integration and Inter-ethnic Relations also writes about the barriers to employment and shows that ethnic minority youth believe their ethnicity is a barrier to their employment, next to nepotism and other barriers.⁹³

2) Professional competencies and quality of education is moved to the background in the job-searching process, and employment becomes a matter of corrupt deal. Due to its clan and hierarchical style, local self-government remains a closed space for talented, ambitious, educated youth. To be hired in an administrative position, one must satisfy two criteria: paying for a celebration fiest for persons high up in the hierarchy and obedience. Tigran Tarzyan told us: *"My aim, essentially, was to return to Javakheti after graduation. I imagined I would start working in some administrative position at the local self-government organs. I graduated in 2018. A vacancy appeared in the Municipality. I applied, I got interviewed, etc. I passed each stage with very high scores. But in the end, one acquaintance called and told me: "You know what a good fella you are, active, but staffing is decided by someone else here. [...] If I had paid a bribe and paid for the celebration, I could have gotten some position at the self-government. But this is against my principles."*⁹⁴

3) Youth who can't find a stable workplace even after learning the Georgian language and acquiring higher education are, unfortunately, compelled to get seasonal jobs with their compatriots living in Russia,

⁸⁹ An interview with Ekaterine Kapalyan was recorded on 6th of January 2023 by Ketevan Epradze online.

⁹⁰ An interview with Gohar Aghjoyan

⁹¹ An interview Ekaterine Kapalyan

⁹² An interview with Gohar Aghjoyan

⁹³ Gorgadze, Natia. Tabadze, Shalva. "A study of employment of 1+4 program graduates by analyzing a general context and a concrete example", the Center of Civil Integration and Inter-ethnic Relations 2019, 58. <https://cciir.ge/images/Research-cciir-2018-14.pdf> (Seen on 30.01.2023).

⁹⁴ An interview with Trigran Tarzyan

which usually means heavy physical labour at construction companies. Vova Karapetyan would say: *“Our employment in Russia is conditioned by inadequate salaries and lack of jobs. If jobs are created, the population won’t leave any more.”*⁹⁵ Katya Ananikyan comments on the same: *“There is nothing there [in Javakheti]. Not only for myself but for no one. When I go there, I think life has stopped. There is not even public transport to commute from villages to the city. Neither is there any employment opportunity. Neither women nor men have jobs. Men go to Russia, women stay at home.”*⁹⁶ Tigran Tarzyan underscored that *Russia is not what Javakheti Armenians dream of: “There people know very well how it is in Russia. When you start with them, you will understand they don’t want to go to Russia any more. If the government employed them and paid around 300-500 Lari, they wouldn’t go anywhere from Javakheti and work for our country.”*⁹⁷

Community activism is yet another significant aspect of citizenship as perceived by the Armenian youth. There are a lot of problems in Javakheti that require attention and searching for solutions. Zoya Alvanyan mentioned a few: *“Gender inequality, early and forced marriage, various crimes [including corruption and clan deals], hatred towards one another and lack of respect”*.⁹⁸ According to Zoya, turning a blind eye to these problems leads to having a weak state in the end. She sees the potential of young civic activists positively in the local community and thinks there are changes in the region compared to the past. The respondent highlights that many residents don’t like the work performed on civic problems.⁹⁹ Tigran Tarzyan also spoke about barriers to activism: *“We are very passive in civic activism. There are many reasons for this. There are changes, but these are project-based changes. [...] there used to be a time when Javakheti civil society was more active. This activism was interpreted very differently from Tbilisi. As either separatism or autonomy. When they say Javakheti wants autonomy and unification with Armenia, autonomy was indeed mentioned, but unification with Armenia was not. There was a big fear of assimilation. Because that period was very bad. Activists from that time managed to attain something with the help of their activism. Here in the centre, there is a statue of Mesrop Mashtots, and plates and inscriptions are in three languages. Local self-government websites have an Armenian language option. More than 90% employed on the local level are Armenians. Particularly in high political positions. This is a very good outcome.”*¹⁰⁰ Nonetheless, Tigran also highlights that former activists made a deal with the governments of different periods and created Mafiosi clans. Due to this, the development of community activism is neither in the interests of the centre nor of the local political leaders. The former is afraid of activism turning into separatism, while the latter is afraid of change in government attitudes and the collapse of the nepotist order.¹⁰¹ Lilit Karapetyan also spoke of the development trajectory of community activism. To her mind, youth will manage to achieve changes when they start focusing on strengthening the non-governmental sector and will demand that the Municipality leadership resolves problems: *“Neither the youth nor the rest has trust in political parties, or in non-governmental organizations. [...] in terms of improvements, I think we need reactivation of non-governmental organizations and collaboration with the local self-government*

⁹⁵ An interview with Vova Karapetyan

⁹⁶ An interview with Katya Ananikyan

⁹⁷ An interview with Tigran Tarzyan

⁹⁸ An interview with Zoya Alvanyan recorded on the 4th of January 2023 by KEtevan Epadze online.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ An interview with Tigran Tarzyan

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

organs. I used to be disposed very negatively towards the local self-government organs, but then I saw that nothing will change and the situation will remain the same unless we cooperate."¹⁰²

Participation in cultural life is another aspect of citizenship for the youth. According to the respondents, cultural processes are frozen in Javakheti. In addition to this, locals don't have the opportunity to introduce themselves to the Georgian culture and share their own with other citizens of Georgia. Ekaterine Kapalyan notes: *"Georgians' arrival here is very important, and so is our visit to Georgian-speaking villages and cities. We will be introduced to the culture of one another, and stereotypical approaches may weaken [...] we need to establish such things, so that Javakhetians know how [other citizens of Georgia] live, and we are no longer isolated."*¹⁰³ Tigran Tarzyan also spoke about participation in cultural life. He believes that the Georgian Government doesn't see the development of Armenian culture in Javakheti as part of the cultural processes of Georgia and doesn't spend its financial resource on its preservation or development, which in the end, causes the collapse of art and cultural spheres and drains specialists from the region: *"Thinkers who are writers, poets, painters, etc. – such people are being realized not in Georgia but in Armenia. There are plenty of poets and artists in Gandza, but these people are in Armenia, they work in Armenia, they represent Armenia internationally, the same happens in sports, dances, music."*¹⁰⁴

Our respondents wish to live in a tolerant and equal rights environment, which is much connected to the idea of citizenship in their understanding. The youth think it is still a challenge in Georgia to overcome the barriers between the minorities and the majority, which hinders the establishment of harmonious relationships between the two. The issue of stereotypes is mentioned by Ekaterine Kapalyan too. She was speaking of the ambivalent attitude that exists in Georgian society: *"I love Georgian society very much. They are interested in other people's situations. [...] I don't remember anyone saying: You are Armenian, what do you do here? I have only seen such comments on Facebook. This affects me a lot. When I would see people badmouthing Armenians in comments, I used to ask: the people I used to study and work within Tbilisi and the people who write comments, is this the same society?"*¹⁰⁵

Lilit Karapetyan emphasised the importance of mutual communication between the groups. *"I don't know why but Georgians think badly of Armenians. I think they have better attitudes towards Azerbaijanis than towards Armenians. But I don't know why is this so. Before, I might have thought very positively of every Georgian, but now I think rather highly of those who know the history, know that we are citizens of Georgia."*¹⁰⁶ Tigran Tarzyan shared interesting thoughts about forming stereotypes and overcoming them: *"The nationalist approach is strong among Armenians. You, Georgians, are also radical nationalists with regard to certain issues. In the 19th century Armenophobia started against the rich Armenians in Tbilisi. Later, narratives of separatism were created of Javakheti Armenians. Bagramyan battalion used to fight against Georgians in the Abkhazian war... Constant reiteration of past will draw us apart. Stereotypes and confrontations will spoil communication among us."*¹⁰⁷ According to Tigran, the control policies used by the centre in the region contribute to strengthening stereotypes rather than eliminating them. Therefore he believes that seeing local population's needs and interests is rather

¹⁰² An interview with Lilit Karapetyan

¹⁰³ An interview with Ekaterine Kapalyan

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ An interview with Lilit Karapetyan

¹⁰⁷ An interview with Tigran Tarzyan

important: *“What I want to say is that the state has a wrong behaviour with regard to integration. It works top-down, not bottom-up.”*¹⁰⁸

The assessments made by respondents show that Armenian youth associate citizenship in their life to a spectre of ideas, which is inconsistent with the concept proposed by the centre. That is why we can say their civic identity is still being formed and negotiated. Youth interviewed by us don't feel that the state hears them and sees their needs. These perceptions show us that integration politics is locked in the frame of documents, needs to be rescued from being a prisoner of formalities and adjust to practical needs.

Conclusion

As part of this research, we tested if the identity concept proposed by the political elites coincided with the perceptions of Armenian youth about citizenship. We also assessed the necessity and fairness of the dominant narrative existing in Javakheti. We were short of resources to conduct full-fledged and representative research and reveal how civic identity is formed among the Armenian population in Javakheti. Therefore we set limits and selected youth between 18-30 years old as our research group, who received secondary education in the post-Revolutionary period and continued their education at Georgian Universities.

We chose civic nationalism typology as our conceptual underpinning, which sides with the idea of nation-formation through inclusion, participation and openness. Let us also highlight that such a model of the nation is rare in contemporary societies, ideologies selected by political elites are often presented in a mixed form. These concepts helped us with an in-depth analysis of identity matters.

We showed the formation of a nation model by Georgian political elites through the lens of mixed ideologies, and we confirmed the first statement mentioned in the beginning that the ideology selected by the centre and the national project created on its basis do not match with one another. The second statement, connected to the first one, turned out to be also fair. Besides the fact that the identity discourse is tailored around the Georgian group, the perceptions of minorities are ignored on economic and political levels too.

In the paper, we showed how Armenians have been interacting with the diversity of Georgian national projects. This way, we brought to the fore that Javakheti Armenians did not have the opportunity to participate in nation-building for a long time. They got this opportunity on a legal level during the Shevardnadze rule. The space of interactions grew after Rose Revolution, and Armenian youth were given the opportunity to socialize in the Georgian-speaking space with the help of education reforms.

We had the same situation preserved in the years to follow. Despite positive changes, throughout the post-Soviet period, identity politics is focused on a number of matters, such as knowledge of the language and loyalty towards the ruling party's political interests, which also means obedience to the clan order established in the region. Georgian political elites couldn't manage to see the motives of Armenians from a social perspective and to re-evaluate the problematic narrative of separatism that is affiliated with them.

The position of the centre is not shared among our respondents. The interviews showed great potential for synthesizing civic and ethnic identities. But we see a problem in a mismatch between different ideas of citizenship. Citizenship in the everyday life of the youth doesn't match the concept offered by Georgian elites. The perceptions of the youth are rather broad and stand close to the principles of civic nationalism – inclusion, participation and openness. Consideration of their ideas will allow the integration

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

policies to leave formal frameworks and make nation-building inclusive. In addition to that, at the same time, this is a good opportunity for revising the dominant narrative and separatism-related stereotypes about Javakheti. Their existence is anachronist in nature and presents a barrier for establishing healthy perceptions, attitudes and relationships.

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