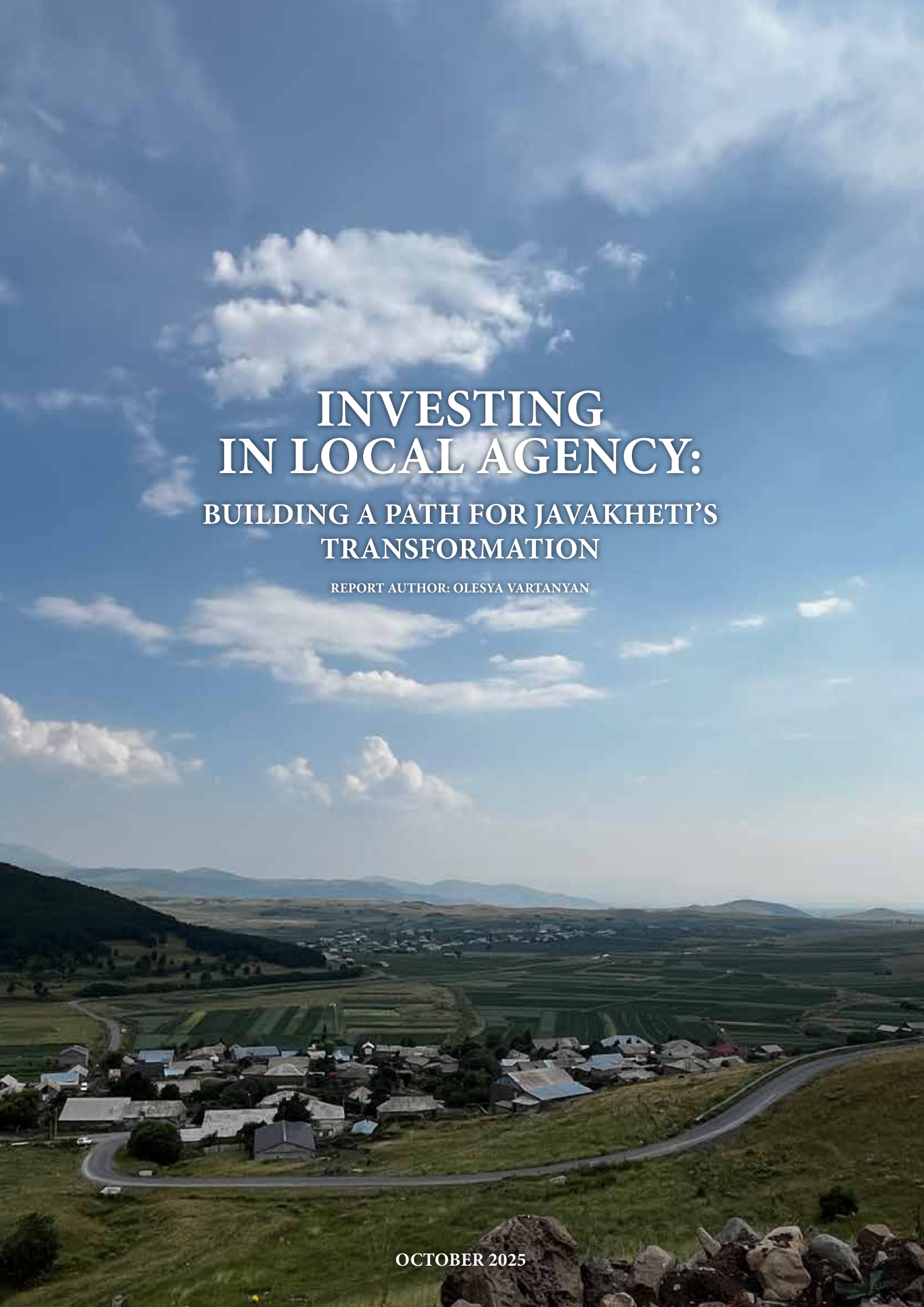

INVESTING IN LOCAL AGENCY:

BUILDING A PATH FOR JAVAKHETI'S TRANSFORMATION

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OCTOBER 2025

Investing in Local Agency:
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On a frosty December day in the center of Akhalkalaki, the main town of Georgia's Javakheti region, a quiet local revolution unfolded. In front of a monument to the creator of the Armenian alphabet, six young female journalists and a single civic activist held up signs in multiple languages. They were expressing solidarity with reporters hospitalized with serious injuries during the violent police dispersal of street protests that were taking place in the Georgian capital following the 2025 parliamentary elections.

THIS BRIEFING HIGHLIGHTS SEVERAL BOTTOM-UP INITIATIVES IN JAVAKHETI. THEY ARE LOW-COST, HOMEGROWN SOLUTIONS, AND THEY REPRESENT SOMETHING LARGER: A SHIFT TOWARD LOCAL AGENCY.

While similar demonstrations had already taken place in other regions, this was the first public protest of its kind in Akhalkalaki. Problems in the region are plentiful, yet locals tend to avoid even the most basic forms of public discontent – let alone staging political street protests over events in distant Tbilisi. The demonstration left the town bewildered and passers-by visibly stunned. "People didn't just refuse to support us," recalled one participant. "They were embarrassed to even look in our direction." After a short vigil, the group rolled up their posters and quietly dispersed, having confirmed that activism of this sort does not work in Javakheti.

The episode offers a vivid glimpse into life in this mountainous, southern edge of Georgia, known to local Armenians as Javakhk. Of the region's roughly 67,000 residents, the vast majority are ethnic Armenians who often speak little Georgian and struggle to see themselves as part of the country. Although Javakheti has been the focus of state-run integration programs for nearly two decades, progress has been sluggish and results questionable. Despite trade and transport links with the rest of Georgia, as well as neighboring Armenia and Turkey, much of the local population continues to live in an isolated bubble, the contours of which remain opaque to outsiders.

This isolation renders Javakheti's residents especially vulnerable. While the region – that consists of two separate districts – does have locally elected authorities, their powers are limited and insufficient to address key challenges on their own. Instead, an outsized role is played by Georgia's security services. Under the pretext of preventing separatism and cross-border crime, these agencies have for decades interfered in nearly every major decision concerning the region. When a local – be it an activist or simply someone with a strong opinion – steps across a line perceived to align with the political opposition, they risk not only personal repercussions but also pressure on their families. These are problems no one can resolve alone.

Nor can locals expect meaningful support from the outside. In the 1990s, neighboring Armenia offered a degree of patronage, providing financial, energy and political backing to some local elites. But over time, faced with its own unresolved conflicts with Azerbaijan and Turkey, Armenia's influence in the South Caucasus waned. Keen to maintain vital road links with its main strategic partner at the time – Russia – Yerevan could ill afford frictions with Tbilisi. From the early 2000s, Armenia began stepping back from direct engagement with Javakheti. Eventually, it even facilitated a full rupture between Armenian political groups and Javakheti activists whose rhetoric displeased Georgian authorities.

This vulnerability to pressure from Tbilisi becomes especially visible during Georgia's election cycles. Re-

gardless of the political contest playing out in the capital, Javakheti has consistently delivered record levels of support for the ruling party of the time. In last year's parliamentary vote – held amid a prolonged national political crisis – the region once again handed the Georgian Dream party over 90% of the vote, the highest figure in the country. The same happened twelve years earlier, in 2012, when the then-ruling United National Movement lost power in most regions – but not in Georgia's south.

Such stark expressions of Javakheti's political dysfunction routinely fuel emotive debate in wider Georgia. Opposition figures and civil society groups accuse local Armenians of political passivity, while the government is accused of using the region to rig votes. But these arguments are short-lived. Few take the time to examine the root causes of Javakheti's malaise, and the region itself remains unchanged. For opposition parties, Javakheti offers little incentive: it is deeply dependent on the ruling elite – no matter who is in power – and, in national terms, has too few voters to matter. One partial exception has been the European Union's integration projects, which over the past decade have invested significant funds in developing Javakheti's civil society sector. Yet in the absence of wider reforms in other spheres, even this has not led to meaningful societal and political transformation.

THESE GRASSROOT INITIATIVES COULD GROW STRONGER - AND POSSIBLY SCALE - THROUGH BETTER LINKS WITH REGIONAL CENTERS, PEER EXCHANGE, AND INCLUSION IN EDUCATIONAL AND INFORMATION-SHARING NETWORKS.

Still, despite this heavy, suffocating reality, Javakheti continues to live its own quiet life. Protests do happen. So do fiery debates and town-hall meetings. Locals do raise their voices, and they know how to argue with municipal officials. But such activity remains confined within the region, hemmed in by countless formal and informal limits. Yet even this small, controlled space allows some grassroots initiatives to emerge – and a few of them deserve recognition.

This briefing highlights several bottom-up initiatives in Javakheti. Most were launched voluntarily, without donor backing, and some remain entirely informal. Yet they address real, structural problems – education, isolation, economic stagnation – and succeed precisely because they are trusted by the people they serve. These efforts are not conventional "projects." They are low-cost, homegrown solutions, and they represent something larger: a shift toward local agency.

If supported with even minimal infrastructure – knowledge-sharing networks, peer exchange, small grants – these initiatives could become the backbone of a resilient civic culture in Javakheti. In an era when civil society space is shrinking across Georgia, grassroots volunteerism may soon become the only viable form of democratic engagement. In Javakheti, it may already be.

Whatever their scale, these grassroots initiatives deserve recognition. Support does not always need to be financial: many of them are capable of sustaining themselves. But they could grow stronger – and possibly scale – through better links with regional centers, peer exchange, and inclusion in educational and information-sharing networks. Preserving and nurturing these efforts would not only help keep dialogue alive within Javakheti's closed-off society. It could also lay the groundwork for future civic and political participation – when Georgia becomes ready for it.

Gulnara and Women's Health. In her early fifties, Gulnara Elizbaryan found her purpose as a grassroots activist in Javakheti, joining a network of women who travel across remote villages to break taboos around reproductive health and empower others through open conversation, microbusinesses, and self-organized retreats. A former homemaker who raised children while her husband worked abroad, Gulnara is now a trusted voice on topics like prevention of sexually transmitted diseases – issues rarely discussed in this conservative society. Despite health setbacks, including a stress-induced heart attack after news of Georgia's planned restrictions on civil society, she remains undeterred. Today, she helps run new initiatives like Georgian language classes for women of all ages and a plastic bottle recycling drive to support low-income families. Her quiet revolution shows how grassroots networks – though often informal and volunteer-led – can fill critical gaps in public health, education, and female solidarity where institutions fall short.

Lida and the Book Club. In the village of Orja, Lida Almasyan and a group of students and recent graduates founded a book club that doubles as a space for critical thinking, dialogue, and the pursuit of freedom in a traditionally conservative setting. With books handpicked in Yerevan and Tbilisi on topics like personal liberty and morality, the club fosters open discussions about both literature and current affairs – often joined by guest speakers from other regions. Though informal and lacking a permanent venue, the club persists with outdoor meetings and a modest subscription fee to grow its collection. For Lida, who splits her time between Tbilisi and her native village, the goal is to equip the next generation with ideas, curiosity, and compassion – a stark contrast to the aggression she observed growing up.

Enok and the Farmers. After losing his job, Enok Babajanyan built Javakheti's first successful greenhouse farm – by hand, from scratch – and grew it into a thriving agricultural business. In a region where few crops survive the cold, Enok defied the odds with solar panels, supply chains for early seedlings, and sheer determination. His Facebook group, *Potato Farming in Akhalkalaki*, now connects over 5,500 members, sharing advice, tools, and encouragement. More than a businessman, Enok is a mentor, urging others to take risks and build for the long term. Though local bureaucracy often thwarts formal reform, his informal digital network has become a more powerful engine for change – one that is already reshaping how rural communities think about farming, entrepreneurship, and self-reliance.

Paruyr and Village Troubles. Housebound by illness and tethered to an oxygen machine, Paruyr Madoyan turned to Facebook to document village life in Poga – and in doing so, became a force for change. His page, followed by nearly 2,500 people, combines poetry, photos, and commentary on local issues, from waste management to stray dogs. With no computer or formal training, Paruyr writes, edits, and publishes from a mobile phone, building a platform that rivals regional news outlets. His posts have inspired cleanups, fundraising drives, and renewed civic attention in a community that had long felt forgotten. Though initially scorned for his candour, he has since earned the respect of villagers who once urged him to stay quiet, proving that even the most isolated voices can become essential ones.

Heshtia and the Village Fund. In the village of Heshtia, a small WhatsApp group formed during the pandemic has blossomed into a powerful local fund that meets urgent needs – from medical bills to school fees – through monthly donations from both residents and diaspora members abroad. Known as *Do Good*, the initiative has over 1,000 active contributors and has co-financed road repairs, water infrastructure, and even a public stadium. Home to a unique Catholic Armenian community, Heshtia shows how grassroots philanthropy can knit together far-flung networks and deliver tangible results. In a region hollowed out by migration, the fund has strengthened social bonds and sparked a quiet revival – one driven not by government, but by trust, initiative, and the enduring loyalty of those who never quite left.

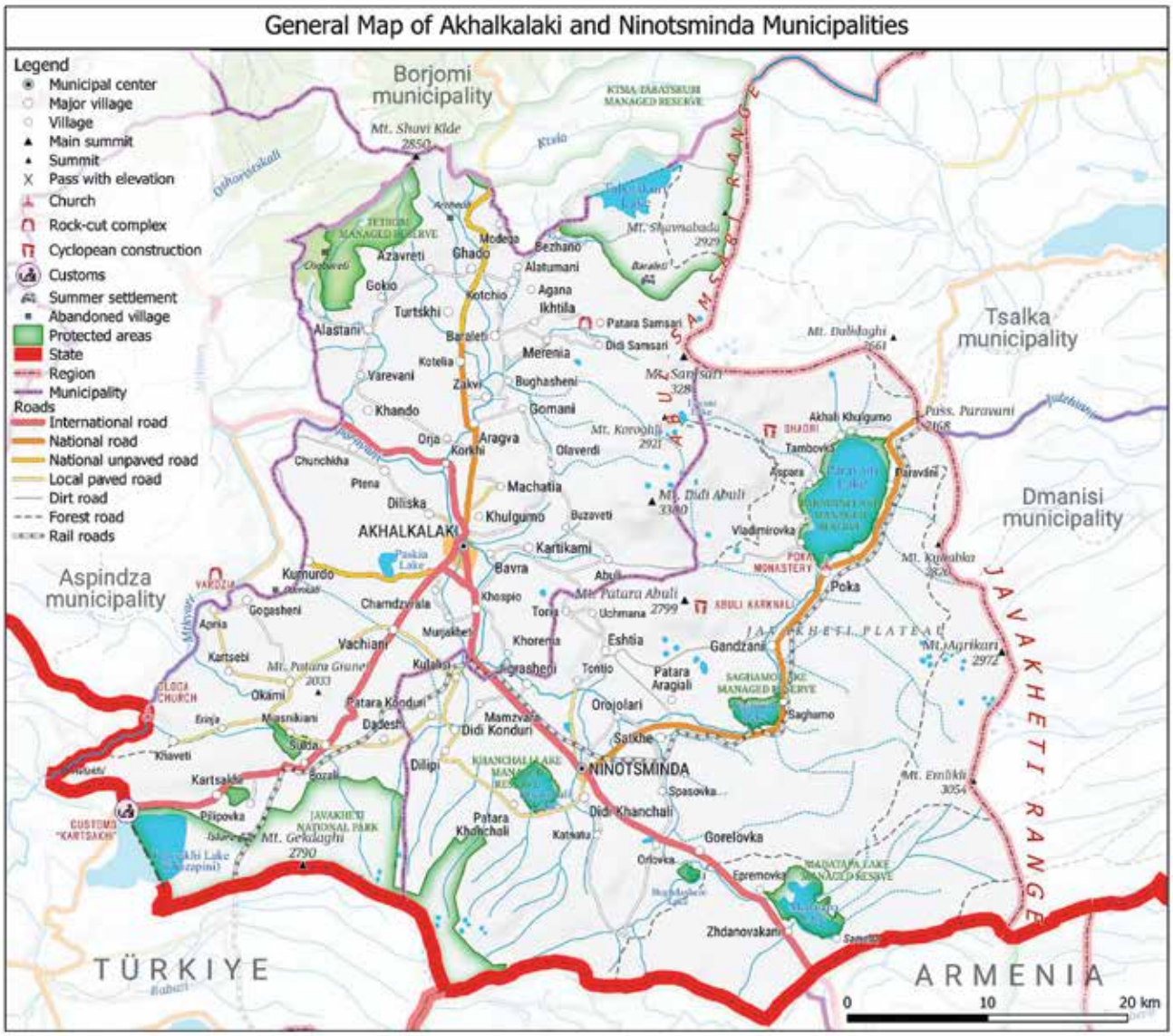
Kumurdo and the School That Changed Everything. In the village of Kumurdo, an anonymous donation –

widely known to be the work of local-born entrepreneur Hayk Mgdesyan – has reshaped the community's future. With over $4 million invested, a sleek, state-of-the-art school now stands where children once studied in fire-damaged ruins. It boasts science labs, a swimming pool, and sports fields unmatched in the region. Since the ribbon-cutting, Kumurdo has seen new kindergartens, paved roads, and government offices arrive – proof that one act of private generosity can trigger a wave of public investment. Mgdesyan's quiet philanthropy, rooted in a lifelong connection to his village, offers a rare example of transformative rural development in Georgia: not just a school, but a signal of what's possible.

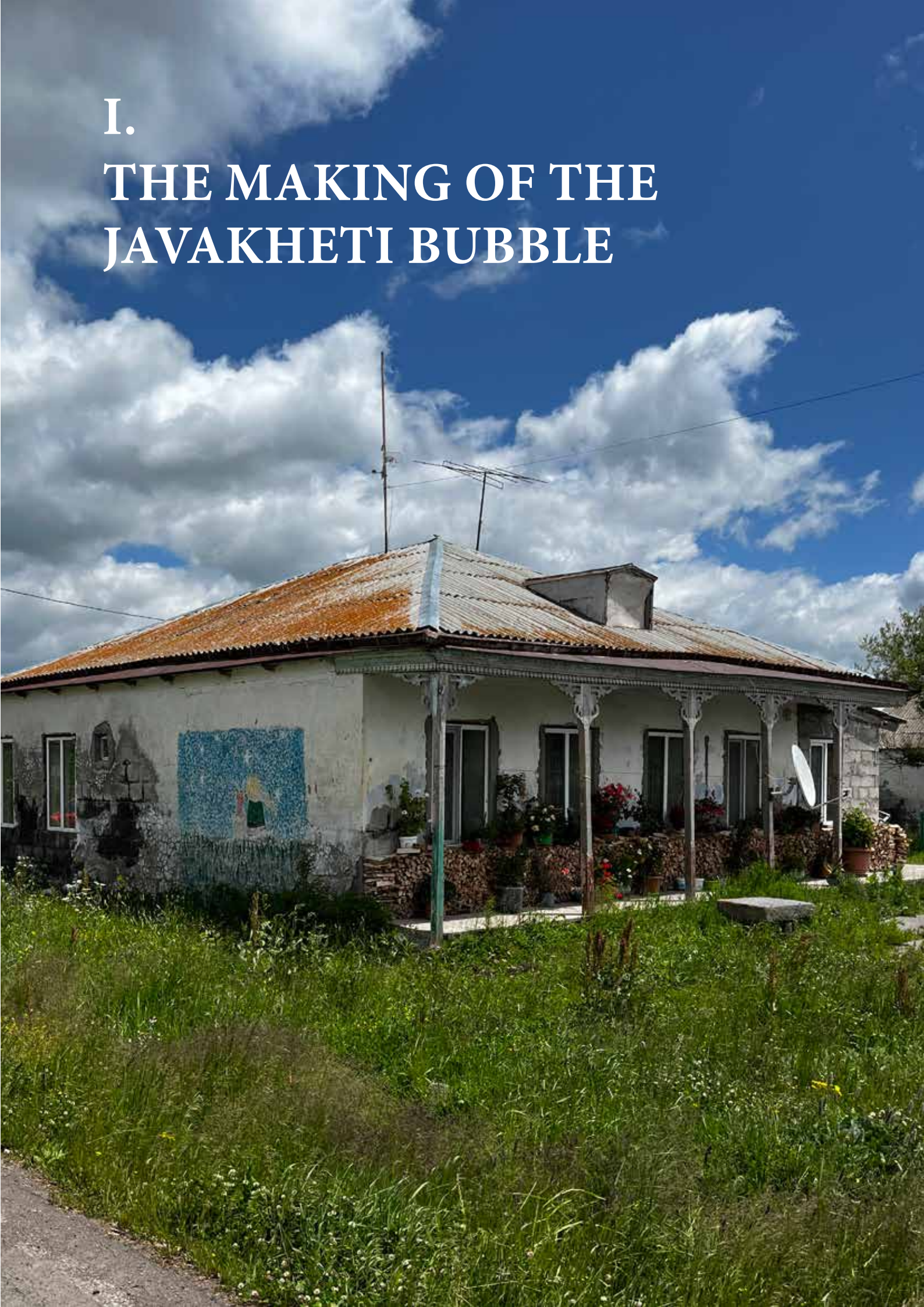
An Armenian Foundation and the Museums of Memory. Launched by diasporic Armenians with ties to Javakheti, the Support to Javakheti Foundation has become a vital conduit for preserving heritage and supporting education in a borderland often overlooked by mainstream aid. Among its standout achievements are the restoration of two historic house-museums: one honoring 19th-century folk singer Jivani, the other the early 20th-century poet Vahan Teryan. With new exhibitions, websites, and cultural programming – including joint events with Armenian and Georgian officials – the foundation has turned memory into a living, shared asset. As traditional foreign funding dries up, its model of diaspora-led, government-coordinated engagement may be one of the last sustainable avenues for civil society work in the region.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a combination of desk research and fieldwork conducted between April and July 2025. A comprehensive literature review was carried out, drawing on academic studies, policy papers, media reports, and other relevant sources to establish the historical and political context of Javakheti. In addition, the research involved a series of in-depth interviews, both online and in person, with a range of stakeholders in Tbilisi and Yerevan. Field visits to Javakheti were central to the research process, during which the author conducted semi-structured interviews with local activists, current and former officials, NGO representatives, journalists, and residents. These conversations provided valuable insights into the lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges facing the region today.



I.
THE MAKING OF THE JAVAKHETI BUBBLE



The region's isolation has been decades in the making. During the Soviet era, Javakheti sat on the border with Turkey – a strategic location that brought with it a permanent military presence. Soviet bases, scattered across various villages, imposed their own rules and restrictions on local life. In the early 1950s, after Turkey joined NATO, Javakheti was designated a closed zone. Ordinary people could not enter without special permission from Soviet security agencies.[1]

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought change, but not necessarily cohesion. While no Javakheti groups ever sought independence, its ethnic Armenian population increasingly gravitated towards neighboring Armenia.[2] This drift was driven not only by linguistic and cultural affinities, but also by the relative economic advantages Armenia enjoyed at the time.[3] In contrast, Georgia was mired in civil unrest and fighting in two separatist regions. The 1990s saw a wave of mass emigration from Javakheti. By some estimates, the region's population had halved compared to its Soviet-era peak. According to the latest 2024 census, Javakheti is now home to around 67,000 people.[4]

	1989		2002		2024	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Akhalkalaki district	69,3		45		43,7	
	33,7	35,6	22,1	22,1	21,6	22,1
Ninotsminda district	38,9		24,5		23	
	19,2	19,8	12,2	12,3	11,4	11,6

Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia; Demoscope Weekly.

Although the region is predominantly Armenian, its residents are distinct from the population of Armenia proper. They speak dialects belonging to the Western Armenian linguistic group – used mainly in the diaspora communities that spread across the Middle East, the Americas and parts of Europe following the genocide in the early 20th century. While most Armenians in Armenia can understand these dialects, they are not accepted for use in official communication, education or mass media.

Yet linguistic differences have not prevented Javakheti natives from integrating into Armenian society after emigrating there. Many happen to hold public office, including top posts in the Armenian government, and they are active in the country's political and civic life. Until the 2010s, Armenia remained a magnet for young people from Javakheti. That began to change only after the Georgian government introduced a set of integration programs aimed at drawing the region's population closer to Tbilisi.[5]

1 International Crisis Group, "Georgia: The Javakheti Region's Integration Challenges", Europe Briefing No. 63, 23 May 2011.

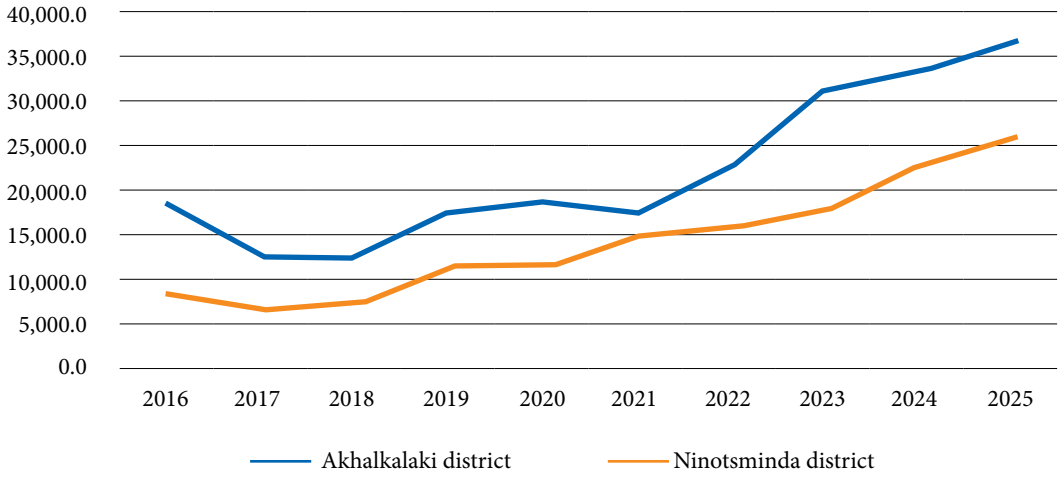
2 International Crisis Group, "Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities", Europe Report No. 178, 22 November 2006.

3 Christian Beddies, Enrique Gelbard, Gevorg Sargsyan, and Davide Lombardo, "Armenia: The Road to Sustained Growth", International Monetary Fund, 2005.

4 For preliminary results of the 2024 census, see the website of the National Statistics Office of Georgia at: https://census2024.geostat.ge/en/results

5 Jonathan Wheatley, "The Integration of National Minorities in the Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli Provinces of Georgia: Five Years into the Presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili", ECMI Working Paper #44, September 2009.

Today, Georgia's capital is far more attractive to young people from Javakheti than Yerevan.[6] Admission to Georgian universities requires only a test in General Skills in Armenian. Most successful candidates then receive a year of free Georgian-language instruction before enrolling in a degree program. Graduates emerge with qualifications and fluency in the state language – an advantage over their parents' generation, who often lack Georgian skills and struggle to navigate the bureaucracy of state employment. The programs have propelled emigration of young people from Javakheti to Tbilisi. The new graduates are also facilitating business links with Georgian companies, helping expand market access for locally produced goods.



Source: Ministry of Finance of Georgia

But while more ethnic Armenians from the region now speak Georgian and hold degrees from Georgian institutions, the basic inability of local authorities to solve everyday problems remains unchanged. Although budgets for the two Javakheti districts have grown in recent years, Georgian law severely limits the powers of local self-government. Municipalities can fund road repairs or install public lighting, but they are powerless in the face of crises or are often unable to influence policy set in Tbilisi. Key decisions, such as those related to education, are made centrally by the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia.

This overdependence on the center fuels political corruption. To secure attention for local problems, officials have little choice but to strike deals with central authorities. In exchange, they are expected to guarantee political loyalty. This quid pro quo has created a system in which Tbilisi hand-picks regional power-brokers – people with sufficient wealth or family networks to ensure compliance. Georgia's security services and other enforcement bodies serve as the eyes and ears of the capital, ensuring the will of the center is upheld in the periphery.[7]

6 According to the State Minister's Office for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, the number of students using the special university entrance exam system increased nearly sixfold between 2010 and 2018. See "Program 1+4", State Minister's Office for Reconciliation and Civic Equality.

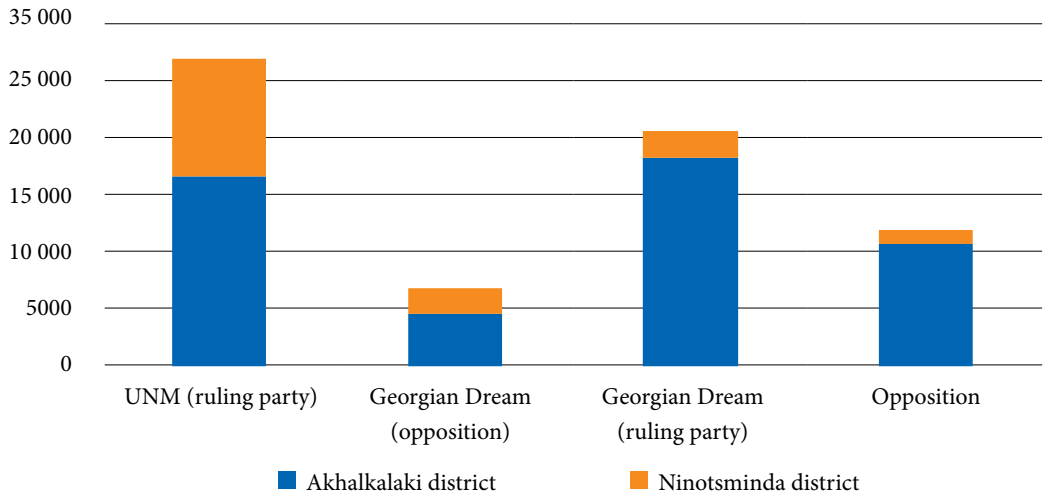
7 Social Justice Center, Elis Bakradze, Sopho Rostiashvili, Ani Isakadze, and Keti Chutlashvili, "Ethnic Minorities Under the Security Gaze: Practices of Control in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Dmanisi", (Georgian), Tbilisi, 2025.

1. THE ROOTS OF POLITICAL STAGNATION

Javakheti was not always so docile or loyal. Bursts of public activism in the region have typically echoed larger political upheavals in Tbilisi. In the early 1990s, when a new nationalist government came to power in Georgia, activists in Javakheti began voicing their own nationalist slogans. Some demanded greater autonomy, while others went further – calling for unification with neighboring Armenia.[8] Over time, this wave of activism subsided, in large part due to Yerevan's reluctance to stoke another conflict on its border. Armenia was already embroiled in war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh and had no appetite for fresh instability nearby.

Another surge of political tension gripped the region in the early 2000s, when Georgia's new leadership moved to establish firm control over the country's peripheries. While similar reforms were underway across the nation, the drive to consolidate state institutions and stamp out corruption was met with suspicion in Javakheti. Many locals saw it as an attempt to impose external authority – and possibly even discriminate against them.

Tensions deepened following the Russian-Georgian agreement, reached at the 1999 OSCE Istanbul summit, to close the military base in Akhalkalaki by 2007. For locals, this was a bitter loss. The base provided hundreds of jobs and injected money into the regional economy.[9] The result was a series of large-scale protests, drawing thousands into the streets. Some leaders of the movement were later absorbed into the political establishment, while others either left the region or abandoned activism following arrests, intimidation or prison sentences.



Source: Election Administration of Georgia

Since then, political life in Javakheti has settled into an eerily predictable rhythm. When things do happen, they tend to remain confined to the local level and rarely attract attention in the capital. Georgia's opposition

8 International Crisis Group, "Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities", Europe Report No. 178, 22 November 2006, page 16.

9 Kornely Kakachia, "End of Russian Military Bases in Georgia: Social, Political and Security Implications of Withdrawal", *Central Asia and the Caucasus* no. 2(50), 2008.

parties have largely written the region off.[10] Javakheti is viewed as too dependent on the ruling party – and too difficult a terrain for building loyal political networks. According to election observers, campaigning in the region is prohibitively expensive for the opposition, which prefers to focus on more accessible areas.[11]

The numbers speak for themselves. In the 2024 parliamentary elections, only around 57,000 voters cast ballots in Javakheti.[12] The ruling Georgian Dream party won almost all of them – yet the opposition managed to offset those losses by capturing support among Georgian emigrants abroad.[13] "Whoever is in power has almost total control there," explained one international observer present during the vote. "They don't even need to falsify results. It all happens naturally."

For years, the only outlier was the United National Movement (UNM), founded by former president Mikheil Saakashvili. Even after losing power, UNM retained significant support in Javakheti. Many voters credited the party with tangible improvements to local life: roads were paved, order was restored, new schools were built. But this reservoir of goodwill evaporated in 2020, when Saakashvili publicly backed Azerbaijan during the second Nagorno-Karabakh war. Though geographically distant, the conflict claimed over 5,000 Armenian lives – including many young men originally from Javakheti. In that year's elections, UNM won only a sliver of the vote in the region. Its local leaders never recovered.

2. CIVIL SOCIETY, SUSTAINED BY LOCAL REALITIES

Over the past decade, for those in Javakheti seeking to improve life in their communities, civil society has become the only real alternative to public sector employment. This sector has steadily expanded with backing from the European Union, its member states, and a host of Western-funded initiatives linked to Georgia's broader integration with the EU. These programs have offered training for local officials, journalists, and NGO staff, while also launching agricultural development projects – an obvious focus in a region where farming remains the primary livelihood. Other efforts have targeted youth engagement, helping to train young activists and involve them in local decision-making.

Local authorities have generally been open to collaboration, provided that civil society activities do not contradict their understanding of national or immediate political interests. As one municipal official explained, reflecting a widely held view: "If you stay away from politics, we'll always be open to cooperation."

The Georgian government's decision to abandon its path toward European integration now threatens to drastically curtail – or even eliminate – local NGO activity. Most civil society organizations in Javakheti registered under the "foreign agents" law introduced in 2024 and are preparing to do so again under even harsher legislation adopted in 2025.[14] A few have already shut down entirely. Others continue operating for

10 Salome Kandelaki, "Integration of Ethnic Minorities in Georgia: Barriers to Political Participation", Policy Paper no. 16, August 2020.

11 "Opposition Passivity in the Regions: Causes, Prospects, and Participation in the Upcoming Elections", *Jnews.ge,* (Russian), 31 March 2025.

12 For data on voters in the region in 2024, consult the official website of the Central Election Commission (CEC).

13 To learn more about the trends, check Fagan Abbasov, "Political Engagement and Electoral Behavior of Ethnic Minorities", Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), 13 September 2024.

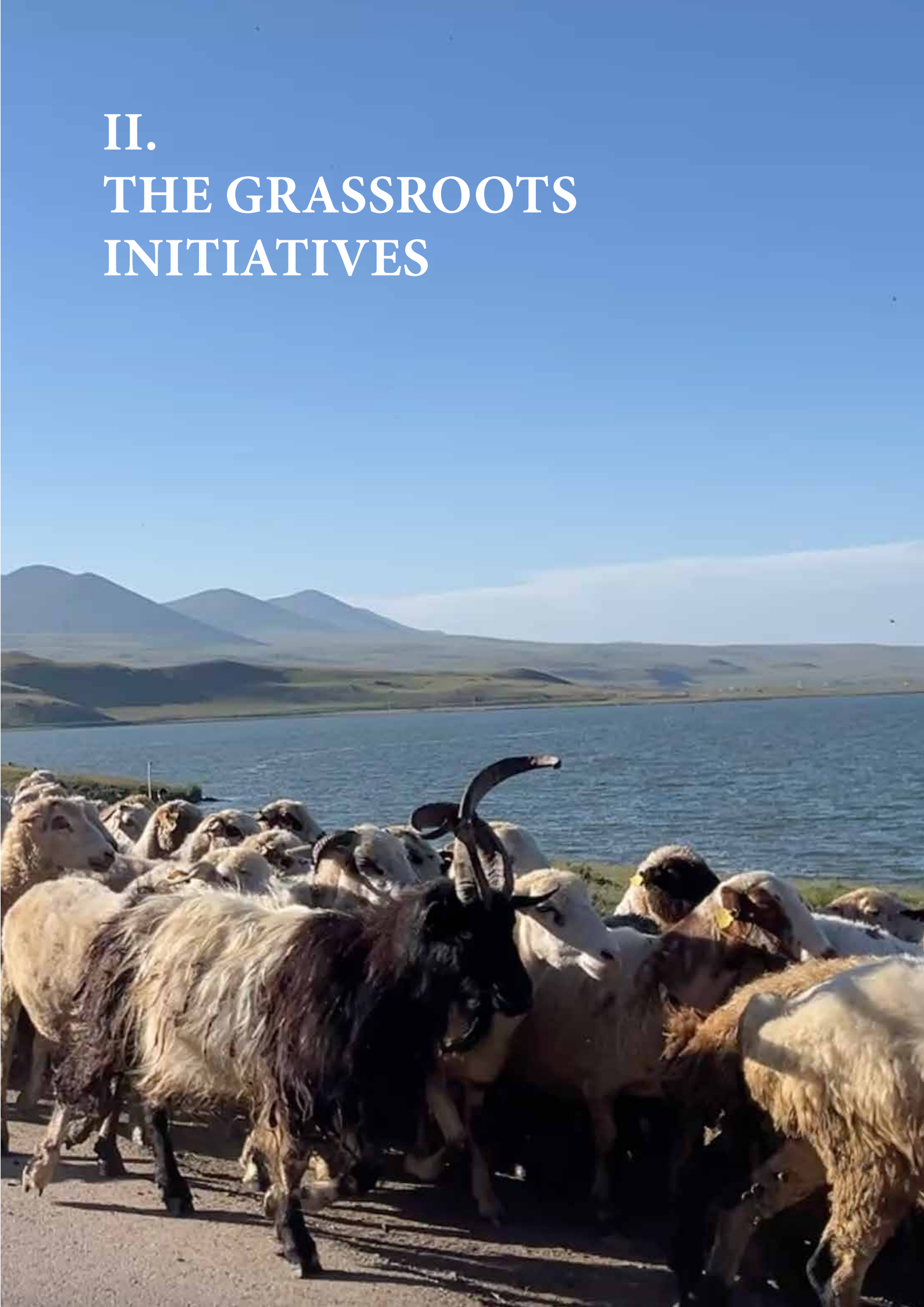
14 "How many organizations are registered in the foreign agents registry", *Jnews.ge,* (Russian), 10 December 2024.

now, but fear that their work could soon end – if not through state pressure, then due to the rapid decline in civil society funding.

Despite these headwinds, links between civil society actors and local authorities in Javakheti continue to exist, albeit in a fragile state. Historically, the most effective model has been pragmatic cooperation around shared interests. For example, some NGOs successfully lobbied for new public transportation routes, negotiating directly with municipal officials. While counterparts in Tbilisi and other Georgian regions have seen communication with authorities break down completely, in Javakheti, some practical ties remain intact. "There are too few of us, and we all know each other too well," explained one local activist. "Even if you're in power, you still have children growing up here. You still care about making their lives better."

Meanwhile, a new generation of activists – educated at top Georgian universities and fluent in the state language – is beginning to reshape the region's civic landscape. While public protests in Javakheti remain rare, many young people from the region have joined demonstrations in the capital, openly sharing their views on social media and speaking to journalists. "This generation won't be satisfied with a new asphalt road or a working water pipe," said a local NGO representative. "They've tasted what freedom feels like."

II.
THE GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES



One way to preserve at least a minimal level of civic activity in a region as complex as Javakheti may lie in supporting grassroots initiatives. This approach has gained traction in countries drifting toward authoritarianism, where formal civil society work is increasingly curtailed. In Russia, it has become known as the "theory of small deeds" – an idea rooted in the desire to remain useful, despite political and social constraints.[15] Around 15 years ago, it gave rise to a new wave of volunteerism. Analogues to this theory can be found in other parts of the world, as well as in academic work that explores resistance through collective, often apolitical, action aimed at the common good or shared community interests.[16]

In Javakheti, such bottom-up efforts rarely face opposition from either local or central authorities, precisely because they lack explicit political overtones. These initiatives tend to focus on improving education, enhancing daily life, or sharing knowledge and skills in areas of public importance. So far, no serious attempt has been made to frame these efforts as activism – let alone as a potential challenge to the political status quo.

At present, these grassroots initiatives likely have the best prospects for survival and growth in Javakheti. Importantly, they are not seen by locals as foreign impositions. On the contrary, they are conceived, executed, and led by residents or natives of the region – and aimed at improving their own communities.

EXTERNAL SUPPORT COULD FOCUS ON HELPING PARTICIPANTS CONNECT WITH BROADER CIVIC NETWORKS WITHIN GEORGIA OR ABROAD - ENABLING EXPERIENCE-SHARING, MUTUAL LEARNING, AND SOLIDARITY. ANOTHER FORM OF SUPPORT COULD COME FROM SIMPLY RECOGNISING THE VALUE OF SUCH EFFORTS.

Support for these initiatives does not necessarily have to come in the form of money. Most of them are run on personal resources or volunteer efforts. In this sense, external support could focus on helping participants connect with broader civic networks within Georgia or abroad – enabling experience-sharing, mutual learning, and solidarity. Another form of support could come from simply recognising the value of such efforts. These local initiatives, modest as they may seem, are crucial for sustaining community engagement – and, by extension, for preserving a measure of social freedom in an otherwise closed-off region.

What follows is a selection of successful initiatives – diverse in scale, focus, and impact. Together, they offer a glimpse of what might be possible and suggest potential avenues for support in a region that too often slips off the map.

15 Nikulin, A. M., and E. S. Nikulina, "Theory of 'Small Deeds' as a Populist Practice of the Middle Class", *RUDN Journal of Sociology* 24, no. 3 (2024), pages 848–855.

16 For example, Ted Robert Gurr, Why Men Rebel, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970.

1. GULNARA AND WOMEN'S HEALTH

It wasn't until her early fifties that Gulnara Elizbaryan discovered her true calling: grassroots activism for women's rights in her home region of Javakheti. About five years ago, a group of women visited her village, Kartikam. Word spread that these unusual guests would return. Gulnara asked her relatives to find out the time and place of the next meeting. Within a year, she had become an indispensable member of the mobile women's groups that now travel across rural communities in the region.

Petite, with a neat haircut and a smile that rarely fades, Gulnara has a way of instantly earning people's trust. Her story is typical of many women in Javakheti: she married straight out of school and raised her children alone while her husband spent most of the year working seasonal jobs abroad. "I've always searched for a deeper purpose," she says. "Now I understand: I live to help other women avoid my fate."

For the past five years, Gulnara has been part of a growing regional network of women who meet regularly to collaborate on small-scale projects – some collective, some individual – and occasionally succeed in driving tangible improvements in their communities. Much of their work is voluntary. They pool small sums of money to organize weekend retreats: a chance to dance, relax, and talk openly about personal issues. Some early projects received support from foreign embassies and international organizations, which helped several women in nearby villages start microbusinesses – their first jobs in a lifetime.

TO SHOW THE IMPACT OF THEIR WORK, GULNARA SUGGESTS THAT THE REGION COULD BENEFIT FROM REGULAR VISITS BY PROFESSIONALS IN HEALTH, EDUCATION, BUSINESS, OR OTHER KEY SECTORS.

But what Gulnara considers most important are the outreach trips to rural villages, where the women meet others in safe, intimate settings to talk about reproductive health – a taboo subject in this conservative society. "We explain, for example, that women should ask their husbands to get tested before resuming sexual relations after males were away on seasonal work for months," says Gulnara. The region has seen cases of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections – topics rarely, if ever, discussed. "In our culture, even mothers and daughters don't talk about these things. But we must."

When Gulnara learned that Georgia's new laws might ban or severely restrict future civic projects, the stress triggered a heart attack. She spent over a week in a hospital in Tbilisi under close medical supervision. The incident left such an impression on her fellow activists that they resolved to keep going no matter what. This summer, they launched a local initiative to collect plastic bottles for recycling, using the proceeds to buy food and essentials for low-income families. They also opened a permanent Georgian language course in Gulnara's village, now attended by women of all ages – including Gulnara herself.

To keep the momentum alive, Gulnara believes it is essential to continue supporting their activities – even if it must remain volunteer-driven. To show the impact of their work, she suggests that the region could benefit from regular visits by professionals in health, education, business, or other key sectors. "We need workshops and exchanges," she says. "We're not going to sit at home. But we need to keep bringing in new women and even the girls – soon enough, they'll need this knowledge too."

2. LIDA AND THE BOOK CLUB

In another corner of Javakheti, locals have found an alternative way to start conversations about women's rights – and broader questions of freedom and justice. For the past several months, a book club has been running in the village of Orja. Its members include senior students at the local high school – the only one in the area – as well as a few recent graduates. With outside support, they raised funds to purchase new books in Armenian and Georgian, travelled to Yerevan and Tbilisi to buy them, set up a WhatsApp group, and now meet regularly to discuss the ideas sparked by their reading.

ANOTHER PRIORITY IS EXPANDING THE READING CLUB'S REACH BEYOND THE VILLAGE - AND IDEALLY BEYOND THE REGION. THAT WOULD REQUIRE CONNECTING WITH EXTERNAL GUESTS WHO CAN JOIN DISCUSSIONS AND OFFER NEW PERSPECTIVES.

Among the club's founders is Lida Almasyan, who divides her time between Tbilisi and her native village. Along with friends, she carefully selected books that explore the meaning of life, personal freedom, and other philosophical themes. "I've always dreamed that our village children would grow up differently from us," she says. "That they would carry kindness and love, instead of the aggression I often witnessed from men in my childhood."

Some discussions feature guests from other cities. These meetings go beyond the books themselves: participants reflect on national and global events, drawing connections between ideas and realities. According to Lida, the goal is to nurture critical thinking – something schools often fail to teach. "We want them to understand how things connect," she says.

The village technically has a library, but few people know when it opens or what books it holds. In winter, the club moves its activities online, as the members have no indoor venue they can rent. In warmer months, they gather outdoors – often in a gazebo near the village where picnics are held.

Because the club operates on a voluntary basis, its members are less concerned about potential shutdowns under Georgia's new restrictive laws. What does worry them, however, is the challenge of renewing their small book collection. Recently, the group decided to introduce a modest subscription fee – about one dollar per book. While this could help ease the financial strain, fundraising in this way will take time.

Another priority is expanding the club's reach beyond the village – and ideally beyond the region. That would require connecting with external guests who can join discussions and offer new perspectives. Without outside support, this would be difficult to arrange. But even modest help – such as facilitating introductions to professionals in Tbilisi or elsewhere in the South Caucasus – could make a meaningful difference.

WITHOUT OUTSIDE SUPPORT, THIS WOULD BE DIFFICULT TO ARRANGE. BUT EVEN MODEST HELP - SUCH AS FACILITATING INTRODUCTIONS TO PROFESSIONALS IN TBILISI OR ELSEWHERE IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS - COULD MAKE A MEANINGFUL DIFFERENCE.

3. ENOK AND THE FARMERS

Some local actors are trying to change life in Javakheti through social media. Enok Babajanyan is one of the most successful among them. He runs the region's most popular Facebook group: *Potato Farming in Akhalkalaki*, with over 5,500 members. There, he shares tips on cultivating certain crops, promotes greenhouse farming, and advertises produce for sale. The group also features listings for second-hand agricultural equipment and other farming-related content. Thanks to this online community, Enok has become the region's most prominent innovator in agriculture.

His journey into farming was born not of ambition, but of necessity. After losing his job several years ago, Enok decided to pursue a long-held dream: to build a greenhouse farm. It was a highly risky endeavor in this cold, mountainous region. Years earlier, he had defended a university thesis on the subject. He calculated the approximate start-up costs and began building his first greenhouse by hand. Around that time, he met representatives from an EU-funded program who encouraged him to apply for a grant competition for individual farmers. Not only did Enok win support for his own project, he was also invited to join a regional agricultural development commission. This led to further invitations to meetings and conferences, where he built a network of like-minded farmers both in Georgia and abroad.

Today, Enok runs a sizable operation. Next to his house in the village of Murjakheti stand two large greenhouses, where he cultivates tomatoes, cucumbers, herbs and other vegetables - produce that normally fails to ripen in the region, even under greenhouse conditions. To coax life from the soil, Enok installed solar panels to warm the ground and air. He also developed a supply chain for seedlings from other parts of Georgia where summer arrives earlier than in Javakheti. Despite the upfront costs, his venture has become profitable. "My produce sells out faster than I can post about it in the group," he says. His crisp cucumbers and ripe tomatoes are in high demand, purchased by both individual customers and local shops. "There's never enough to go around."

Enok's success has drawn widespread attention. Over the past two years, a steady stream of visitors has arrived at his farm – some of whom have since built their own greenhouses. He now offers regular advice to a few of them. "The biggest obstacle isn't money," he says. "It's fear of trying something new." In his experience, most aspiring farmers lack the skills and confidence to start a business that won't yield immediate returns. "I try to infect them with the idea," he jokes. "But it doesn't always work. We need more success stories so that people gain the courage to try."

MANY OF THE BARRIERS TO AGRICULTURAL INNOVATION, ENOK BELIEVES, ARE INSTITUTIONAL. HE FINDS THAT HIS FACEBOOK GROUP IS A MORE EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR CHANGE. IT HAS HELPED HIM FIND NEW CONTACTS AND, AT TIMES, CREATIVE SOLUTIONS TO OTHERWISE INTRACTABLE PROBLEMS.

Many of the barriers to agricultural innovation, he believes, are institutional. Enok and other farmers have held meetings with local officials to push for reforms, but such efforts rarely bear fruit. Officials tend to defer to higher authorities – faceless figures in distant offices – who remain out of reach. Enok believes his Facebook group is a more effective tool for change. It has helped him find new contacts and, at times, creative solutions to otherwise intractable problems.

4. PARUYR AND VILLAGE TROUBLES

At 49, Paruyr Madoyan is trying to change life in his home village of Poga. Around five years ago, after a serious illness left him dependent on an oxygen machine, he was forced to remain indoors most of the time. To stay connected, he created a Facebook page. There, he began posting poems, photographs, and memories of fellow villagers – some of whom had emigrated, others who had passed away. Over time, his posts began to include commentary on local problems and appeals to address them. His page about the village of Poga has nearly 2,500 regular followers and rivals many regional media outlets in popularity.

PARUYR IS ENTIRELY SELF-TAUGHT. HE DOES NOT OWN A COMPUTER. ALL OF HIS POSTS ARE WRITTEN AND PUBLISHED FROM A MOBILE PHONE. STILL, PARUYR REMAINS A CENTRAL NODE OF VILLAGE LIFE.

Through his blogging, Paruyr has already managed to bring about tangible change. A few years ago, for instance, his posts about rubbish piling up along the main road led local authorities to organize a cleanup. In another case, he launched a successful fundraising campaign to support the families of six local men who had moved to Armenia and died in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war. At present, he is campaigning to address the issue of stray dogs, which have been attacking poultry and livestock on the outskirts of the village.

Paruyr is a singular figure in the region: an activist who tackles problems through online storytelling. Though Poga is one of Javakheti's largest villages, it lies far from the region's main towns. Residents often feel cut off from the rest of the world. Even so, Paruyr says, few people are willing to speak out. When he first began publishing complaints on Facebook, even his own family urged him to stop "shaming the household with public grumbling." But the longer he persisted, the more responses he received. And when his efforts started producing results, his family – and even skeptical neighbors – began to believe that social media could indeed drive change.

Paruyr is entirely self-taught. He does not own a computer; all of his posts are written and published from a mobile phone. On it, he has taught himself to edit photos and make simple video montages. It is also where he writes his poems and short stories. A few of his pieces have grown so popular that they have been turned into songs. Locals often send him photos, videos, and tips about potential topics. Though housebound, Paruyr remains a central node of village life. He knows everything that happens in Poga.

5. HESHTIA AND THE VILLAGE FUND

In one of Javakheti's larger villages, residents decided not to wait for help from outside. Instead, they created a homegrown support fund to address their community's needs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a group of locals launched a WhatsApp chat to coordinate donations for buying groceries for elderly and low-income households.[17] The group remained active even after the crisis subsided – and soon began attracting

17 Anait Zalalyan, "Do Good for Heshtia" – Charity Campaign", Radio NOR, 19 February 2018.

THESE GRASSROOTS EFFORTS ARE HELPING TO CONSOLIDATE SOCIAL TIES. TOGETHER, VILLAGERS ARE TACKLING PROBLEMS THAT WOULD BE DIFFICULT – IF NOT IMPOSSIBLE – TO SOLVE INDIVIDUALLY.

not only those still living in the village, but also emigres scattered across Europe and beyond. What started as a one-off gesture became a monthly ritual: each participant now contributes regularly to the fund, which is used to meet a range of local needs.

Today, the WhatsApp group – called *Do Good* – has over 1,000 active members. The money raised goes towards expensive medical treatments, tuition fees for students from disadvantaged families, and more. On several occasions, the fund has raised such significant sums that villagers have been able to approach the local authorities with co-financing proposals – for example, to repair roads or upgrade the village's water system. Part of the funds came from the public budget, the rest from the community itself. With joint resources, the village has managed to build a sports ground and an open-air stadium in the town center. This summer, the group organized a village celebration, inviting not only residents but also people from neighboring communities.

These grassroots efforts are helping to consolidate social ties. Together, villagers are tackling problems that would be difficult – if not impossible – to solve individually. Heshtia is a unique village, home to a Catholic Armenian community that speaks its own distinctive dialect. Geographically and culturally, it is somewhat detached from the rest of the region. But initiatives like this could become a model for other local settlements – particularly those with large diasporas abroad. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, migration has halved the region's population, but the sense of belonging among those who left has proved remarkably resilient.

6. KUMURDO AND THE SCHOOL THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

One of the most remarkable acts of local philanthropy in recent memory is found in the village of Kumurdo, where a sleek new school has transformed the face – and future – of the community. The expansive facility, designed for 450 pupils, boasts multiple sports fields, a swimming pool, and fully equipped assembly halls.[18] Inside, the building features state-of-the-art renovations, complete with science labs and modern classrooms. Even beyond Javakheti, few schools in Georgia's provinces can compare in quality or scale.

There is no plaque, no sign, no formal mention of the benefactor behind this project. But every resident of Kumurdo knows who made it possible: Hayk Mgdesyan, a native of the village who amassed a fortune through the wholesale trade of sunflower seeds across Russia and neighboring countries. In recognition of his contribution, villagers invited his elderly mother to cut the ribbon at the school's grand opening in 2018. In the photographs and video footage from that day, a modest woman in a headscarf smiles as she stands alongside Georgia's minister of education, who travelled to Kumurdo for the occasion.[19] The villagers later named the street where the school now stands after her.

18 You can see the school, by following this weblink: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MosdtHGQqEI

19 "An Armenian-language school opened in the village of Kumurdo", *1TV*, 17 January 2018.

The impact of the school has gone far beyond the educational sphere. Until recently, children in this large village attended lessons in the crumbling remains of the old school, which had suffered not just from time but from fire damage as well. Now, a new kindergarten has sprung up nearby. Government offices – including the police and public service hall – have opened branches in the village. Paved roads have been laid. Kumurdo is no longer a forgotten outpost, but a rural hub with growing promise.

This shift is particularly striking given Kumurdo's recent history of tension. In 2017, the village drew national attention when a dispute over burial rights between local residents and Orthodox clergy escalated into a confrontation with riot police. Video footage from the time showed special forces using tear gas to disperse villagers, many of whom had gathered around the courtyard of a non-functional 10th century Georgian Orthodox Cathedral, used by the locals for prayers.[20] Several people were injured, and the incident left deep scars – both emotional and political – in the community. Against this backdrop, the arrival of a modern school, built not by the state but by one of Kumurdo's own sons, became a powerful symbol of local resilience and agency.

In total, more than $4 million was spent on the construction and outfitting of the school. In addition, Mgdesyan has offered scholarships for graduates who wish to pursue further education. While philanthropic gestures in the region are not unheard of, they are typically modest – repairs to a roof, supplies for a classroom, perhaps. The Kumurdo school is different: it is a rare example of transformative investment in rural Georgia, with the power to shape not only a community's education system, but its very trajectory.

THE KUMURDO SCHOOL IS A RARE EXAMPLE OF TRANSFORMATIVE INVESTMENT IN RURAL GEORGIA, WITH THE POWER TO SHAPE NOT ONLY A COMMUNITY'S EDUCATION SYSTEM, BUT ITS VERY TRAJECTORY.

7. AN ARMENIAN FOUNDATION AND THE MUSEUMS OF MEMORY

Another channel of investment into Javakheti has come not through the state, but via its diaspora. The Support to Javakheti Foundation was established roughly a decade ago in Armenia – and later in Georgia – by a group of entrepreneurs, clergy, and public figures with personal or ancestral ties to the region.[21] Since its inception, the foundation has worked to preserve local heritage and bolster education, all while maintaining the support of both Armenian and Georgian authorities. In an era when foreign funding for civic groups is becoming increasingly difficult to access, this backing has proven critical.

Among the foundation's flagship projects is the full restoration of two of Javakheti's most culturally significant landmarks: the museums dedicated to 19th-century ashugh and poet Jivani, and to one of early 20th-century Armenian literature's central figures, Vahan Teryan. Both museums are housed in the poets' ancestral homes, located in nearby villages. Thanks to the foundation's investment, these sites now host modern exhibitions and guided tours that attract both locals and visitors from further afield.

20 "Confrontation Leaves Police Officers Injured in Akhalkalaki", *Civil.ge,* 1 October 2017.

21 Please find more about the Support to Javakheti Foundation, its projects, and board members on its official website.

SUCH INITIATIVES ALLOW DIASPORA ARMENIANS TO MAINTAIN MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS TO THE REGION THEY OR THEIR FAMILIES ONCE CALLED HOME. WITH ITS HEADQUARTERS IN ARMENIA, THE FOUNDATION MAY CONTINUE TO SERVE AS ONE OF THE FEW VIABLE CONDUITS FOR OUTSIDE ASSISTANCE TO REACH JAVAKHETI'S COMMUNITIES AS FOREIGN AID BECOMES HARDER TO SECURE.

The foundation's efforts go beyond bricks and mortar. It has funded the development of contemporary websites for both museums, including virtual tours, and organized events featuring officials from both Armenia and Georgia. The result is a cultural revival that enhances regional pride and draws attention to the shared heritage of the borderland.

Importantly, such initiatives allow diaspora Armenians to maintain meaningful connections to the region they or their families once called home. At the same time, the foundation provides a mechanism for supporting local projects transparently and in coordination with Georgian authorities. With its headquarters in Armenia, it may continue to serve as one of the few viable conduits for outside assistance to reach Javakheti's communities as foreign aid becomes harder to secure.

CONCLUSION

Javakheti, a mountainous, Armenian-majority region in Georgia's south, remains a political and cultural outlier. Isolated both geographically and psychologically, it continues to exist at a remove from the country's national life. Despite two decades of state-led integration programs and growing infrastructure links to Armenia, Turkey, and the rest of Georgia, much of Javakheti still functions in a self-contained bubble. Georgian is often spoken poorly or not at all, and many residents struggle to see themselves as part of the Georgian polity.

The region's formal governance structures are weak. Although two districts have elected councils, local authorities wield limited influence. Instead, power is frequently exercised by Georgia's security services, which operate under the stated goal of preventing separatism and controlling cross-border crime. These agencies routinely interfere in decisions far beyond their remit – from education to cultural activity – and those who challenge the prevailing order often face intimidation, not only personally but against their families. In this environment, activism is not just difficult; it is fraught with real risk.

Meanwhile, the region cannot count on external allies. In the 1990s, Armenia provided modest political and economic support to Javakheti's Armenians. But as its geopolitical position weakened – and as its dependence on Georgia for regional access grew – Yerevan gradually pulled back. By the early 2000s, it had begun distancing itself from Javakheti activists whose rhetoric displeased Tbilisi, severing long-standing political ties.

This pattern of political conformity becomes especially visible during Georgia's election cycles. Regardless of which parties dominate the national political scene, Javakheti has consistently delivered overwhelming majorities for the ruling party of the day. In the 2020 parliamentary vote, the region gave the Georgian Dream party more than 90% of the vote – the highest margin in the country. The same occurred in 2012, when most of Georgia turned against the United National Movement, but Javakheti held firm. These

patterns provoke suspicion and criticism: opposition parties accuse locals of political passivity, while the government is accused of vote manipulation. Yet few look closely at the root causes of this entrenched political conformity, or at the structural incentives that keep the region tethered to whoever holds power.

And yet, despite the weight of state control, isolation, and demographic decline, Javakheti is not devoid of civic life. Far from it. A quiet but meaningful transformation is underway – driven not by government policy or foreign donors, but by grassroots actors who are solving problems their own way.

IF SUPPORTED WITH EVEN MINIMAL INFRASTRUCTURE - NETWORKS FOR KNOWLEDGE-SHARING, CONNECTIONS TO REGIONAL PEERS, SMALL GRANTS - THESE EFFORTS COULD BECOME THE BACKBONE OF A RESILIENT CIVIC CULTURE IN JAVAKHETI.

In Kumurdo, a $4 million donation from a native son led to the construction of a world-class school—an act of private philanthropy that triggered a cascade of public investment in roads, kindergartens, and state services. In Heshtia, a Catholic Armenian village, a WhatsApp-based giving circle now raises funds from diaspora and locals alike, paying for emergency medical bills, school supplies, and even a public stadium.

Activists like Gulnara Elizbaryan, who leads village workshops on women's health and civic education, and Enok Babajanyan, who built the region's first high-tech greenhouse and founded a digital farming network, show how knowledge and leadership can emerge from the grassroots. Others, like Paruyr Madoyan, have become community chroniclers, turning Facebook pages into platforms for accountability. In Orja, a youth-run book club fosters critical thinking and open dialogue on topics rarely addressed in formal education. And through the Support to Javakheti Foundation, diasporic Armenians are restoring cultural landmarks and building museums that double as civic spaces.

These initiatives, though modest in scale, represent something larger: a shift toward local agency. They are not "projects" in the conventional NGO sense, nor are they led by professional activists. They are homespun solutions to structural problems – education, isolation, economic stagnation – and they succeed because they are trusted by the people they serve. Most are informal, low-cost, and volunteer-driven. Yet they are succeeding where formal institutions often fail.

If supported with even minimal infrastructure – networks for knowledge-sharing, connections to regional peers, small grants – these efforts could become the backbone of a resilient civic culture in Javakheti. In an era when civil society space is shrinking across Georgia, grassroots volunteerism may become the last viable form of democratic engagement. In Javakheti, it may be the only one.

IN AN ERA WHEN CIVIL SOCIETY SPACE IS SHRINKING ACROSS GEORGIA, GRASSROOTS VOLUNTEERISM MAY BECOME THE LAST VIABLE FORM OF DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT. IN JAVAKHETI, IT MAY BE THE ONLY ONE.

In the end, change in this region will not begin with speeches in Tbilisi or foreign-led development plans. It will begin in village kitchens, home libraries, and greenhouses – where, quietly but unmistakably, it already has.