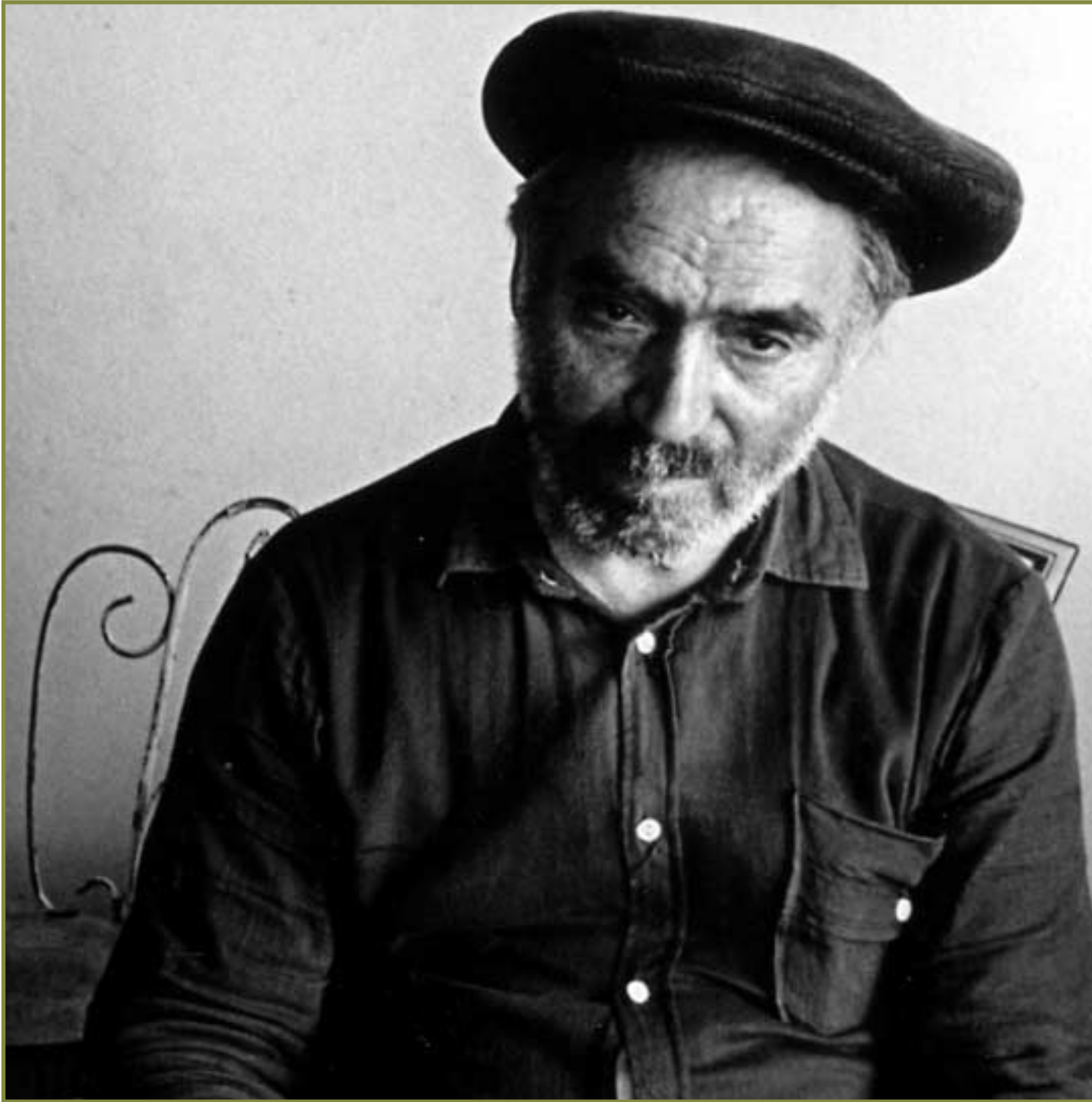


# The South Caucasus: Nationalism, Conflict and Minorities



## **SOUTH CAUCASUS: NATIONALISM, CONFLICT AND MINORITIES**

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## **MINORITY RIGHTS GROUP INTERNATIONAL**

MRG works to secure rights and justice for ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities, and indigenous peoples worldwide. MRG is dedicated to promoting the cause of cooperation and understanding between communities.

Founded in the 1960s, MRG is a small international non-governmental organization that informs and warns governments, the international community, non-governmental organizations and the wider public about the situation of minorities and indigenous peoples around the world. This work is based on the publication of well-researched Reports, Books and Papers; direct advocacy on behalf of minority rights in international meetings; the development of a global network of like-minded organizations and minority communities to collaborate on these issues; and the **challenging of prejudice and promotion of public understanding** through information and education projects.

MRG believes that the best hope for a peaceful world lies in **identifying and monitoring conflict** between communities, **advocating preventive mea-**

**asures** to avoid the escalation of conflict, and **encouraging positive action** to build trust between majority and minority communities.

MRG has consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council and has a worldwide network of partners. Its international headquarters are in London. Legally it is registered both as a charity and as a limited company under English law with an international governing Council.

## **THE PROCESS**

As part of its methodology, MRG conducts regional research, identifies issues and commissions Reports based on its findings. Each author is carefully chosen and all scripts are read by no less than eight independent experts who are knowledgeable about the subject matter. These experts are drawn from the minorities about whom the Reports are written, and from academics, journalists, researchers and other human rights agencies. Authors are asked to incorporate comments made by these parties. In this way, MRG aims to publish accurate, authoritative, well-balanced Reports.



*Azeri refugee in Azerbaijan,  
from Lachin/Berdzor.*

JAN BANNING

# The South Caucasus: Nationalism, Conflict and Minorities

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## Relevant international instruments

### **Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (Adopted by the UN General Assembly; Resolution 47/135 of 18 December 1992)**

#### *Article 1*

1. States shall protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories, and shall encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity.
2. States shall adopt appropriate legislative and other measures to achieve those ends.

#### *Article 2*

1. Persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities (hereinafter referred to as persons belonging to minorities) have the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, and to use their own language, in private and in public, freely and without interference or any form of discrimination.
2. Persons belonging to minorities have the right to participate effectively in cultural, religious, social, economic and public life.
3. Persons belonging to minorities have the right to participate effectively in decisions on the national and, where appropriate, regional level concerning the minority to which they belong or the regions in which they live, in a manner not incompatible with national legislation.
4. Persons belonging to minorities have the right to establish and maintain their own associations.
5. Persons belonging to minorities have the right to establish and maintain, without any discrimination, free and peaceful contacts with other members of their group, with persons belonging to other minorities, as well as contacts across frontiers with citizens of other States to whom they are related by national or ethnic, religious or linguistic ties.

#### *Article 3*

1. Persons belonging to minorities may exercise their rights including those as set forth in this Declaration individually as well as in community with other members of their group, without any discrimination.
2. No disadvantage shall result for any person belonging to a minority as the consequence of the exercise or non-exercise of the rights as set forth in this Declaration.

#### *Article 4*

1. States shall take measures where required to ensure that persons belonging to minorities may exercise fully and effectively all their human rights and fundamental freedoms without any discrimination and in full equality before the law.
2. States shall take measures to create favourable conditions to enable persons belonging to minorities to express their characteristics and to develop their culture, language, religion, traditions and customs, except where specific practices are in violation of national law and contrary to international standards.
3. States should take appropriate measures so that, wherever possible, persons belonging to minorities have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue or to have instruction in their mother tongue.
4. States should, where appropriate, take measures in the field of education, in order to encourage knowledge of the history, traditions, language and culture of the minorities existing within their territory. Persons belonging to minorities should have adequate opportunities to gain knowledge of the society as a whole.
5. States should consider appropriate measures so that persons belonging to minorities may participate fully in the economic progress and development in their country.

#### *Article 5*

1. National policies and programmes shall be planned and implemented with due regard for the legitimate interests of persons belonging to minorities.
2. Programmes of cooperation and assistance among States should be planned and implemented with due regard for the legitimate interests of persons belonging to minorities.

#### *Article 6*

States should cooperate on questions relating to persons belonging to minorities, inter alia, exchanging information and experiences, in order to promote mutual understanding and confidence.

#### *Article 7*

States should cooperate in order to promote respect for the rights as set forth in the present Declaration.

#### *Article 8*

1. Nothing in this Declaration shall prevent the fulfilment of international obligations of States in relation to persons belonging to minorities. In particular, States shall fulfil in good faith the obligations and commitments they have assumed under international treaties and agreements to which they are parties.
2. The exercise of the rights as set forth in the present Declaration shall not prejudice the enjoyment by all persons of universally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms.
3. Measures taken by States in order to ensure the effective enjoyment of the rights as set forth in the present Declaration shall not prima facie be considered contrary to the principle of equality contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
4. Nothing in the present Declaration may be construed as permitting any activity contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations, including sovereign equality, territorial integrity and political independence of States.

#### *Article 9*

The specialized agencies and other organizations of the United Nations system shall contribute to the full realization of the rights and principles as set forth in the present Declaration, within their respective fields of competence.

### **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Adopted by the UN General Assembly; Resolution 2200A [XXI] of 16 December 1966)**

#### *Article 27*

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language.

### **Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (Adopted by the UN General Assembly; Resolution 2106 [XX] of 21 December 1965)**

#### *Article 2*

2. States parties shall, when the circumstances so warrant, take, in the social, economic cultural and other fields, special and concrete measures to ensure the adequate development and protection of certain racial groups or individuals belonging to them, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the full and equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms. These measures shall in no case entail as a consequence the maintenance of unequal or separate rights for different racial groups after the objectives for which they were taken have been achieved

# Preface

One of the aims of this Report is to shed light on a region which is under-reported and little understood by outsiders. A second, but potentially even more important aim, is to describe the conditions for majorities and minorities within the South Caucasus region and to encourage them to work together to overcome their differences and to build on what they have in common.

This second aim is of particular significance when we consider the rise of nationalism in the South Caucasus. Just over a decade ago Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia – formerly part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) – became independent states. With this, ethnic affiliations, which have traditionally been strong in the Caucasus, were reinforced and entrenched. Nationalism led to the ideologies, and often religions and languages of the dominant or titular groups, being seen as the norm, with minority communities being overlooked or marginalized.

In addition to, and arguably following on from the growth of nationalism and repression, conflict has been all too common in the South Caucasus – from Abkhazia to Nagorno Karabakh to South Ossetia. Forced population movements and the creation of the breakaway republics are two consequences of a worrying trend in the region towards mono-ethnicism, which could yet lead to further fragmentation.

Furthermore, over 10 years, many question whether life has improved. Independence has brought considerable economic and social hardships, and relatively few people enjoy full democratic rights in the South Caucasus. Minorities in particular have lost out, with the poverty they experience compounded by isolation and often fear. Many have migrated to the Russian Federation, which still retains strong links and influence in the region.

MRG's new Report, written by Anna Matveeva, offers a trenchant analysis of the current position of the South Caucasus and its peoples. The Report outlines the origins of the majority populations, their pre-Soviet history and the impact of the Soviet experience, and discusses the states' political development since independence. The author argues that the manner in which the domestic, social, political and economic context takes shape will affect the future for minority communities. In particular, the author discusses the region's 'frozen' conflicts and efforts to break the deadlocks, and assesses prospects for their resolution.

Central to the Report are varied and complex situations faced by the different minority communities in the South Caucasus. Within the region, governments often seem unwilling to recognize the rights of minorities and many in the majority populations are indifferent to minorities' concerns, while also failing to recognize their contribution to society. Minorities, for their part, seldom trust the states to ensure their well-being and often feel a sense of alienation.

Extensive international involvement in the region has

to date yielded mixed outcomes. Many states regard the South Caucasus as a region of key strategic importance, and are also interested in the Caspian Sea's energy resources. United States of America's (USA's) annual assistance to both Armenia and Georgia has been around the billion dollar mark. The 'war against terrorism' initiated after 11 September 2001 has had an impact on regional politics and is a source of particular concern for Muslim minorities. Conversely, the human rights benefits anticipated from membership of the Council of Europe are yet to materialize.

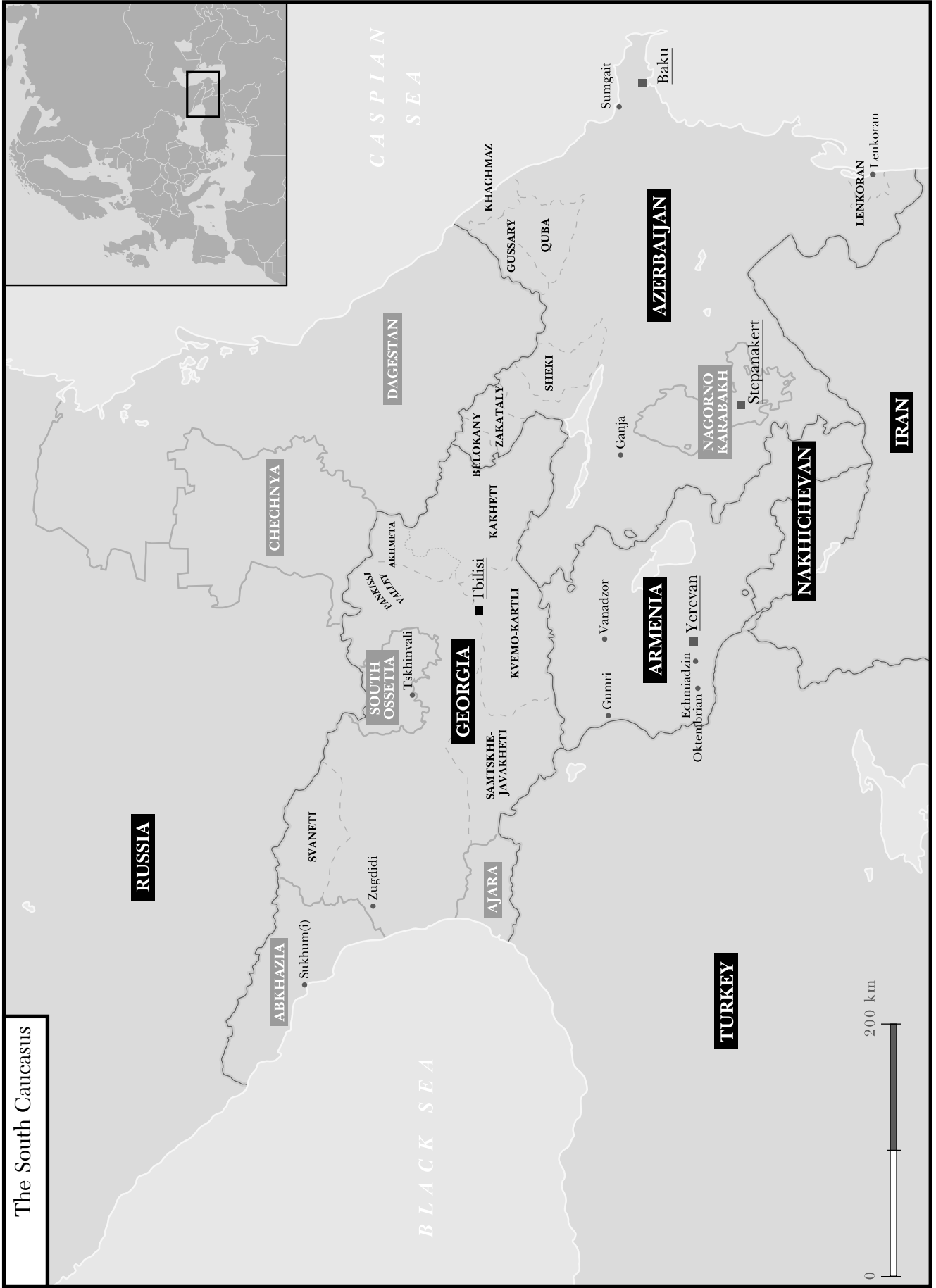
It is hoped that the recommendations at the end of the Report will help further moves towards peace, constructive reconciliation and sustainable development in the South Caucasus. The recommendations are largely directed towards the governments and peoples of the region but the role of other state and international interests and influences should not be ignored. International actors need to look to their own influence in this region to ensure that it is being used positively to further the interests of all the peoples of the South Caucasus.

**Mark Lattimer**

*Director*

April 2002

# The South Caucasus



# Introduction

The South Caucasus, comprising the states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, is internationally known for its conflicts after the break-up of the Soviet Union (USSR) of which it formed a part. Located at the meeting point of the Eurasian steppes and the Middle Eastern highlands, between the Black and the Caspian Seas, the region is criss-crossed by the Caucasus Mountains, a geographical feature which has limited the intermixing of the region's inhabitants and helped preserve strong territorial identities. Historically, the area has been an arena of struggle, and has been ruled by the Persian, Ottoman and Russian Empires, each leaving its own cultural and political legacy. History worked with geography to reinforce ethnic diversity and interconfessional variety.

The three states are small relative to their neighbours – Iran, Russia and Turkey – making them sensitive to external influences. Armenia's population is estimated at 3,336,100 (July 2001, results of the October 2001 census are expected), out of which Armenians comprise 97–8 per cent, the rest made up by Greeks, Russians and Yezidi Kurds.<sup>1</sup> Azerbaijan has a population of 7,953,400 people (1999 census), 91 per cent of whom are ethnic Azeris; the principal minorities are Lezgins (2.2 per cent), Avars (0.6 per cent), and other North Caucasians and Russians (1.8 per cent). The population of Georgia is estimated to be under 5 million (July 2001);<sup>2</sup> the main minorities include Abkhaz, Armenians, Azeris, Ossetians and Russians (proportions are widely disputed).

In the twentieth century, Communist rule sought to create a supranational shared Soviet identity, while providing for the expression of ethnic affiliations for larger groups through a controversial structure of autonomies. The relaxation of Moscow's control under Gorbachev exposed the fragility of this common identity and the continuing strength of ethnic bonds.

The regional pro-independence aspirations of the 1980s found expression in the rise of competing nationalisms, and the Soviet intelligentsia began to propel radical ethnocentrism. Ethnic wars in Abkhazia, Nagorno Karabakh and South Ossetia followed, causing population displacement and massive suffering. International law does not offer a ready resolution of the contradiction between the territorial integrity of states and the right to self-determination. Meanwhile, political developments have pulled the breakaway entities further from the recognized states.

Freed from Russian domination, the majority peoples of the South Caucasus – Armenians, Azeris and Georgians – set about building modern states organized around these dominant groups and already defined borders. Simultaneously, economic crises, and a sharp drop in living standards created a sense of disillusionment with independence. The majorities at least gained the freedom to create their own fate, but the minorities living alongside

them saw only increased hardship and uncertainty. As a consequence, trends towards emigration and mono-ethnicity have intensified, as the titular groups built new political structures and ideologies to support them, and many of the minorities feel increasingly alienated from the new states.

Fragmentation rather than consolidation became a predominant trend in the South Caucasus, as the states and societies departed further from their common Soviet roots. There is a tendency for outside commentators and policy-makers to over-emphasize the similarities between the three Caucasian states. Similarities in culture, values and domestic traditions do indeed exist, although differences have grown as independence has gained momentum. Regional integration and overlapping sovereignties are sometimes presented as a way out of the maze of inter-ethnic troubles. Inside the Caucasus these notions do not find much resonance. Both leaderships and ordinary people among the majorities have invested so heavily in state-building projects that the idea of giving them up seems like sacrilege. Moreover, these societies have become more inward-looking, too preoccupied with their own troubles to take any interest in the plight of their immediate neighbours.

Another tendency is to attribute all the troubles in the South Caucasus to Russia's continuing interference in the region. From this viewpoint, minorities are regarded as highly susceptible to Russian manipulation. If Moscow could be persuaded to stop meddling, it is implied, peace and prosperity would follow. While Russia's post-colonial disengagement in the Caucasus has been far from benign, this view nevertheless overlooks the fact that it is difficult to create broad-based opposition movements unless there is some dissatisfaction in the first place. In addition, without a culture of tolerance and recognition of respect for diversity, it is difficult in any case to achieve stability in the Caucasus.

This Report deals primarily with internal developments in the South Caucasus, offering just a brief outline of the international setting. It is intended as an introduction to the minority issues in the South Caucasus.

# History and politics

## Pre-Soviet history

**B**efore Soviet rule, states in a modern sense did not exist in the South Caucasus. Some peoples, such as Armenians and Georgians, had a period of statehood in the Middle Ages which they can refer to as the origin of their present state-building. Some, like the Abkhaz, had a similar history of statehood, but this was downgraded in Soviet times. Others, like the Azeris, did not have even such a distant history of a state. However, all these peoples share a common history in that, for a long time, they were ruled by different empires which imposed their own patterns of government. These were never firmly entrenched, however, since territories tended to change hands. Until the Soviet period, the region constituted more or less a single whole, without established boundaries, but with free movement of ethnic groups. The institutionalized link between territory and ethnicity was a construct of the Soviet period and provided the basis for modern nationalism to emerge.

### Armenians

Armenians<sup>3</sup> form a distinct group within the Indo-European family. They are mentioned by Xenophon around 400 BCE. Armenians are one of the oldest Christian groups, converting around 314 CE.<sup>4</sup> Their distinct alphabet was devised in the early fifth century. Armenian Christianity is distinctive and follows a Monophysite doctrine.

At different times Armenian kingdoms have occupied lands within the territory of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran and modern Turkey. Eastern Armenia belonged to Iran until 1828, when it was incorporated into the Russian Empire. Western Armenia was controlled by the Ottoman Empire where Armenians suffered persecution in 1895 and the subsequent genocide – in Armenian terms, which Turkey disputes – of 1915, when many fled to become refugees in Eastern Armenia.<sup>5</sup> Estimates of casualties vary from 600,000 to 2 million deaths out of the pre-war population of between 1.75 to 3 million Armenians (the size of the pre-1915 Armenian population of Anatolia is much disputed). Both individual and collective memories of this era are powerful and form a cornerstone of modern Armenian identity.

Armenians, like Jews, are a diaspora nation, with powerful communities in France, Russia and West Coast USA. Many Armenians also live in the Middle East and Iran. Diaspora sponsorship and political influence play an important, sometimes controversial, role in Armenian politics.

Incorporation into the USSR was preceded by a short, but turbulent period of independence (1918–21). Wars with neighbouring Azerbaijan and Georgia were landmarks of the period. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaktsutium or Dashnak), the oldest party in Armenia, sought to govern the state on the twin bases of nationalism and socialism. In 1920, after the dissolution of the Ottoman

Empire, the Western allies and Turkey recognized Armenian independence and awarded it some disputed territory of the former empire. Subsequently, however, Armenia lost territories to Turkey.

### Azeris

**T**he ethnic origins of the Azeris are unclear. The prevailing view is that Azeris are a Turkic people, but there is also a claim that Azeris are Turkicized Caucasians or, as the Iranian official history claims, Turkicized Aryans. Throughout history, Azerbaijan changed hands between the powerful Sasanid, Turkish Seljuk, Central Asian Timurid (fourteenth to fifteenth century) and Iranian Safavid (sixteenth to eighteenth century) Empires. This introduced ethnic diversity into what later became the Azeri people.<sup>6</sup> Today Azeris are divided between the Republic of Azerbaijan and Iran, which is the home of the majority of ethnic Azeris (up to 20 million), although no reliable figures exist.

Russia began to penetrate northern Azerbaijan during the eighteenth century and had conquered the territory of present-day Azerbaijan by 1828, when the border with Iran was established. Islam began to penetrate the area during the eighth century, but conversion to Shi'a Islam occurred mainly in the sixteenth century, under the impact of Safavid Iran.

In the nineteenth century oil was discovered in Azerbaijan, making it one of the first oil developments in the world. The oil boom at the turn of the century attracted many Armenians, Jews, Russians and other minorities to Baku, the capital, giving rise to prosperity and diversity. In 1918–20 Azerbaijan had a brief spell of independence, marked by turmoil and violence that resulted in thousands of Azeris and Armenians being killed. It was reconquered by the Red Army in 1920, with the help of a multi-ethnic group of Baku Bolsheviks.

### Georgians

**T**he Georgian people<sup>7</sup> is formed from those who speak Georgian as their native language, as well as Mingrelian, Laz and Svan speakers. The Georgian language has its own alphabet. The Ajarians, the historic Georgian Muslims (Ajara was ceded to Russia by the Ottoman Empire in 1878), speak a Georgian dialect that shares some features with Mingrelian and Laz. These linguistic, geographic and historical affiliations serve as major points of contention in modern Georgia. While Georgian-speakers tend to deny the existence of separate identities, others assert their exclusivity.

Along with Armenians, Georgians are one of the oldest Christian people. The 'golden age' is associated with the period of rule by Queen Tamar in the twelfth century, but the Mongol invasion in 1236 led to centuries of fragmentation and domination by the Muslim Ottoman and Persian Empires. From the eighteenth century Georgian rulers



sought protection from the Russian Tsar, ultimately leading to the incorporation of Georgian territory into the Russian Empire. In 1811 the Georgian Orthodox Church lost its autocephalous status and the Georgian nobility became increasingly Russified. Russia's wars in the Caucasus in the nineteenth century led to a large exodus of Muslim peoples, such as Abkhaz and Lezgins, to the Ottoman Empire. Their descendants today form a sizeable diaspora in Turkey. Abkhazia came under protection of the Russian Tsar in 1810, but remained autonomous until 1864 when it was incorporated into the Russian Empire.

Meanwhile, the Armenian minority in Georgia in the nineteenth century formed a new bourgeoisie which became a backbone of urban life and gained great economic leverage. Russia, fearing increased power of ethnic Armenians in Georgia, asserted direct control over their religious and political institutions. The legacy of these tensions between Georgians and Armenians persists to this day.

At the turn of twentieth century, some Georgian intellectuals took up Marxist ideas. Young Stalin (born Iosif Dzhugashvili) was one of them. The gradualist Mensheviks took over Georgia when the Tsarist regime collapsed, forming an independent Georgian state. Despite Russia's non-aggression pact with Georgia, in 1921 the Red Army invaded the country.

## Abkhaz

The Abkhaz language belongs to the north-western Caucasian family, closely related to Circassian and Abaza. Demographic changes in Abkhazia have been drastic: the population fell from 140,000 in the 1860s to 58,000 in 1886, and then rose to 103,000 (1989 census). A unified Abkhaz alphabet was introduced in 1928, based on Latin script, but was replaced by a Georgian-based script in 1938. In 1944–54 the Georgian language replaced Abkhaz for use in the public domain as part of an effort to Georgianize the Abkhaz. The present Cyrillic-based alphabet was introduced in 1954 and many of the assimilatory moves were reversed.

Throughout history, Abkhazia has belonged to different empires. It existed as a separate political and cultural entity following the fall of Byzantium, then was incorporated into the Georgian Empire. The Ottoman conquest brought Islam to Abkhazia in the fifteenth century. Georgians and Abkhaz made some joint efforts to overthrow Ottoman rule in the eighteenth century. In 1810 Abkhazia became a Russian protectorate.<sup>8</sup>

## The Soviet period

Unlike in Central Asia, the reconquest of the South Caucasus was accomplished by the Bolshevik forces relatively quickly, partly due to the presence of indigenous Communist groups in the region. Bolsheviks – especially Stalin with his knowledge of Caucasian settings – skillfully manipulated minority grievances against the ruling majority. By promising various peoples that their national demands would be acknowledged, resistance was subdued. From 1922 to 1936 Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia formed constituent parts of the Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic within the USSR, subsequently to

be broken into separate units. Azerbaijan and Georgia contained lower tiers of administrative divisions, to ensure minority protection within their ethnic homelands and to make ethnically diverse territories easier to govern.

The Soviet system recognized the power of ethnicity and used it to relieve pressures in society. However, the expression of nationalist sentiment and political demands based on ethnicity were suppressed. The Georgian origins of key Communists did not save their homeland from the purges of the 1920s and 1930s, which took a heavy toll among the Georgian intelligentsia. However, Georgia and the South Caucasus in general acquired a symbolic significance in the Soviet state, with economic subsidies and pricing arrangements designed to ensure higher living standards. In the Caucasus the Soviet system did not penetrate as deeply into society as in the Slavic parts of the USSR. Private entrepreneurial activities and black markets were never completely eradicated, while corruption eased the effects of the authoritarian system.

The early administrative arrangements laid the foundations for the ethno-territorial disputes that unfolded during the USSR's demise. In the 1920s Stalin sought *rapprochement* with Turkey and thus tended to support Azerbaijani claims to the predominantly Armenian-populated lands of Nagorno Karabakh and Nakhichevan, the latter's population being approximately half Muslim, half Armenian. These political ambitions collided with Armenian aspirations to bring together historical homelands where Armenians still constituted a majority, and undermined their relationship with Moscow.

Multi-ethnic Georgia became a subject of the Soviet ethno-federal construction, in which the union republics had the highest status, followed by the autonomous republics in the second rank. Abkhazia, on the Black Sea coast, was created as a separate Union Republic in 1921, but was joined with the Union Republic of Georgia in a confederation later that year. Abkhazia's status was downgraded in 1931, when it was incorporated into the Georgian Union Republic as an autonomous republic. Large numbers of Georgians migrated into Abkhazia from the 1930s, especially after the Second World War. In 1989, numbering just 93,000, the Abkhaz constituted 17 per cent of the population of Abkhazia, while ethnic Georgians (mostly Mingrelians) accounted for 45 per cent. Georgians were dissatisfied with 'preferential treatment' accorded to the Abkhaz, reflected in personnel appointments, quotas for Communist Party membership, and support for the Abkhaz language and cultural facilities (although, from the 1930s to the 1950s Abkhaz schools were closed, the Abkhaz language was banned and many Abkhaz feared deportation). South Ossetia, in the foothills of the main Caucasus range, which has a smaller population than Abkhazia, established as an autonomous region (*oblast* – a lower status than that of autonomous republic) within Georgia, was another hostage to ethnic tensions. South Ossetians were ruled from Tbilisi and separated from the rest of the Ossetian people, most of whom live in the Russian Federation.

Moscow acted as an arbiter in tensions between the minorities and the titular groups. At times it favoured the titular nations, but also sought to ensure an ethnic balance in personnel appointments and promoted local cadres through the *nomenklatura* system, rotating would-be mem-

bers of the Soviet elite from the minority groups through service in the republican capitals and in Moscow. Later, many such people ended up on the territory of ethnic adversaries.

Ethnic minorities in the Soviet Union were subjected to rigid constraints beyond which national expression was not allowed to expand. Demands for administrative autonomy were not tolerated. However, many linguistic and cultural rights were granted. The Soviet policies of creating written languages based on the Cyrillic alphabet where no written languages existed, brought about a rapid increase in literacy; the promotion of officially sponsored cultural and education institutions supported diversity in the Caucasus, and consolidated ethnic consciousness.

Seventy years of the Soviet rule brought stable government, modernization and development, and physical and social security for most people. It also promoted national languages, culture and education. However, it denied the Caucasians freedom to chose their own fate, forced modernization projects upon them, suppressed religion, purged professional groups and disrupted relations between the Caucasus and the outside world, especially with its southern neighbours, and, in the Armenian case, with the diaspora community.

While establishing independence, most Caucasians tended to regard their history in the Soviet Union as a time of Communist oppression and Russification which was entirely detrimental. After the first decade of independence, however, when many hopes for a better life had been dashed, nostalgia for Soviet times became widespread.

The liberty initiated by *perestroika* enabled all kinds of grievances to be expressed including ethnic ones, but provided few channels to address them. In the turmoil of the late 1980s, unprecedented opportunities were opened up by the weakening of central authority, which political actors in the Caucasus were quick to exploit, testing the boundaries of the possible to the limit.

Initially, ethnic grievances in the Caucasus were driven by demands for greater freedom in local affairs rather than for complete independence. The quest for more cultural rights for minorities also formed part of the agenda in what was regarded at the time as the democratization movement. However, as *perestroika* went further, nationalist aspirations advanced, to the despair of Russian democrats and Gorbachev himself. Gorbachev's inability to address the ethnic grievances in the Caucasus and heavy-handed actions of Soviet troops, responsible for the massacres of civilians in Tbilisi in April 1989 and in Baku in January 1990, unleashed forces beyond Moscow's control. By 1991 Soviet power in the South Caucasus had collapsed, and pro-independence politicians came to power in Georgia and Armenia. In Azerbaijan a 'reformed' Communist authority was still in place.

## Independence

### Armenia

Armenia is the only state in the Caucasus which is almost mono-ethnic (98 per cent). In Soviet days Armenians

numbered 93 per cent of the republican population. The Karabakh conflict with neighbouring Azerbaijan (see *Re-making the map*, pp. 11–14) led to expulsion of ethnic Azeris and Muslim Kurds, while economic hardship prompted the emigration of many Russians.

A change in the elite took place with independence. The new leadership, born out of the struggle for Karabakh, includes war heroes associated with the armed struggle and with the security forces. In Soviet times, a de facto transfer of power from Communists to nationalists had already occurred. The Armenian National Movement (ANM), a dissident group created in 1988, emerged as a powerful vehicle of national mobilization and subsequent state building. Its leader, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, was elected in October 1991 as the first President of Armenia. Having taken power in 1990, the ANM played a crucial role in the transition period, ensuring the maintenance of stable government and the incorporation of the paramilitaries into the organized armed force.

The Karabakh war crisis (beginning in 1988–9), which led to the closure of its borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey, hit Armenia hard. The population was left without heating and electricity. The highly urbanized and industrialized population found it hard to turn to subsistence agriculture, especially since the expelled Azeris and Kurds were mostly farmers. Economic and social deprivation was blamed on the regime. The energy crisis has been overcome by the controversial means of re-launching the Metsamor nuclear power station (closed in 1988) in the seismic area around Yerevan, and diaspora money and political influence secured a soft landing, but many Armenians remain traumatized by this period, and continue to blame it on the first president.

Losing popular backing, Ter-Petrosyan and the ANM resorted to harassment of the opposition and the media. The Dashnak party was banned in December 1994 and its leaders imprisoned. Numerous violations during the September 1996 presidential elections deprived Ter-Petrosyan of popular legitimacy and made him a hostage to the security forces which saved him from falling from power.

Still, unlike neighbouring Azerbaijan and Georgia, Armenia managed its transition to independence without civil war. Violent political battles – some quite extreme – have been contained within the elite group. President Ter-Petrosyan was forced to resign in February 1998 over his readiness to compromise on Karabakh and his increasingly authoritarian rule at home. Robert Kocharian, the former Karabakh leader, was elected President of Armenia in March 1998, amid allegations of electoral fraud. In October 1999, a direct action group assassinated the Prime Minister and six other politicians in Parliament. In March 2000 an attempt was made to assassinate Arkadii Gukasyan, 'President' of the unrecognized republic of Nagorno Karabakh; a military court in February 2001 implicated the Karabakh Minister of Defence, who claims these accusations to be politically motivated.

The national exclusivity of Armenia and the virtual absence of minorities produced nationalism of enormous internal coherence, mobilizing popular energy towards more creative courses rather than a struggle against internal foes. The distance between power and people is not so great as in Azerbaijan and Georgia, where the old party

*nomenklatura* are still in power.<sup>9</sup> Although newcomers to politics, the new elites have a certain sense of responsibility for their country, and economic opportunities are distributed among a number of actors. Implementation and enforcement of policies is often ruthless, but the development agenda is assured and individual security is no longer an issue.

Good international relations and the existence of the diaspora are essential for the survival of the republic. Armenian politicians have managed to secure strong relationships both with Russia and the USA. Recognition of the Armenian genocide by the French National Assembly in 2001 was another victory for the Armenian cause.

## Azerbaijan

In the early years of independence Azerbaijan suffered from intense political turmoil and from serious fighting on the Karabakh front. Its first President, a former Communist, was forced to resign following the massacre of Azeri civilians in Khojaly in February 1992. The opposition Azerbaijani Popular Front (APF) came to power but was unable to deliver basic law and order. Its anti-Russian and pro-Turkish orientation sent adverse messages to minorities, as none of the significant minorities are of Turkic origin – they have stronger leanings towards Russia. Non-indigenous minorities, such as Russians and Jews, as well as remaining Armenians, left mainly for Russia. The Karabakh war provided an additional incentive for emigration.

In 1993 a coup, carried out with covert support from the Russian military based in Azerbaijan and led by rogue Colonel Husseinov from Ganja, brought Heidar Aliiev, the former Communist ruler of Azerbaijan back into power. Aliiev had fallen out of favour during the *perestroika* era, but managed to rebuild his political career from his native Nakhichevan area. Territorial affiliations in Azerbaijan's political culture play an important role in providing the basis for networks of political and economic power.

Aliiev's rule brought stability to the country, modest prosperity and a conciliatory stance towards minorities. Political and economic power, however, is concentrated in the hands of Aliiev and his family. Aliiev (born 1923), on whose physical survival stability in Azerbaijan relies, is apparently concerned with the situation after his exit. His son Ilham is being publicly promoted as the heir. Local observers, however, note that this might be being done to distract attention from the real successor.

The democratic credentials of the Aliiev regime are shaky. All parliamentary and presidential elections have been rigged. Although censorship was officially abolished in 1998, a free media never re-emerged and self-censorship is widespread. Beatings of opposition activists, journalists and representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) by 'unidentified persons' are common. Security forces spy on and harass individuals who demonstrate too much independence. Presidential advisers and ministers frequently fall out of favour. Aliiev sets all the rules of the game.

Nevertheless, life in the country is far from bleak. Many respect the order and security that Aliiev's rule brings. He cannot eradicate corruption, but it somehow serves to soften the impact of the politically authoritarian system. Invest-

ment in the energy sector, regional trade, access to communication links and remittances from abroad all help to improve the economic situation.

The Azerbaijani opposition, which is engaged in vicious internal battles, strengthens the Aliiev regime. The democratic values of the opposition parties, according to local human rights groups, cannot be taken for granted: Aliiev at least allows human rights activists to function, whereas the opposition, if it came to power, might not do so.<sup>10</sup> The militant stance of opposition politicians on the Karabakh issue also creates much apprehension. As a result, popular wisdom – and the Western policy-making community – are inclined to back the Aliiev regime as the least bad option.

## Georgia

At the time of the USSR collapse, Georgia was the most multi-ethnic country of the Caucasus. According to the 1989 census, Georgians constituted 69 per cent of the total; separate registration for other Georgian groups, such as Mingrelians, was denied. Armenians, the largest minority, made up 9 per cent and Russians 7 per cent, largely concentrated in Tbilisi. The internal divisions among Georgians, and the presence of large ethnic minorities, has meant that the issue of defining a Georgian nation is a continuing preoccupation.

Georgia's road to independence has been paved with internal strife, civil war and political assassinations. In 1990–1 popular mobilization brought to power Zviad Gamsakhurdia and his radical Round Table-Free Georgia bloc, which unleashed the forces of nationalism. Minorities were declared 'guests on the Georgian territory' and ethnic clashes followed. Gamsakhurdia's increasingly authoritarian style led to confrontation with his former supporters and a civil war (1992–3), bringing about the virtual disintegration of the state. This coincided with the outbreak of conflicts in the minority areas of South Ossetia (1991) and Abkhazia (1992). Having ousted Gamsakhurdia from the capital in 1992, the prominent warlords Kitovani and Ioseliani invited Eduard Shevardnadze, the former Communist leader of Georgia and the ex-Soviet Foreign Minister, to head the government.

Initially, Shevardnadze was in a weak position, caught between the civil war against Zviadists (supporters of Zviad Gamsakhurdia) and his unruly allies in the capital. By 1995, however, the Zviadists had been defeated, with Russian military help; in return Shevardnadze brought Georgia into the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a largely symbolic and Russian-dominated organization of ex-Soviet states, excluding the Baltics. The President has also rid the regime of warlords and potential rivals.

Importantly, using his reputation as the former USSR Foreign Minister, Shevardnadze has won Western, especially US, support and financial backing on an unprecedented scale: in 2000 the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) spent over \$200 *per capita* in Georgia. Georgia's Euro-Atlantic orientation and anti-Russian stance worked as an excellent fundraising tool, and helped to mask modest economic development, rampant corruption and deeply flawed 1999 parliamentary and 2000 presidential elections.<sup>11</sup>

Shevardnadze's regime has captured the state rather

than transformed it. Although a façade of democracy is maintained, the presidential grouping, mostly family, controls the levers of economic and political power. Byzantine patronage networks, reinforced since the Soviet era, because they centre on extended family loyalties, produce powerful obstacles to good governance, as they breed corruption and ineffective rule.<sup>12</sup>

The core issues of identity and independence remain unresolved, making political consolidation of both state and nation problematic. Debates continue as to whether minorities can constitute a legitimate part of a Georgian nation. There are doubts about whether independence from Russia is permanent and substantive, and whether the new state will take root.

Until recently, the population has remained largely passive, despite severe hardship – including nine winters without proper heating and light. The memory of the turmoil of the early 1990s is a powerful brake on social protest. In autumn 2001 this apathy was disrupted. The government crisis – prompted by a raid by security officials on an independent TV station and aggravated by violence in Abkhazia – led to a major shake-up. Shevardnadze dismissed his unpopular Interior Minister and Prosecutor General (demonstrating his resolve to combat corruption), and trapped parliamentary speaker Zurab Zhvania and his Citizens' Union of Georgia supporters into resignation (undermining his increasingly ambitious allies).<sup>13</sup> While the political community in Georgia appears unable to address real political problems,<sup>14</sup> the President again demonstrated his survival skills.

The issue of succession to Shevardnadze is on everybody's mind. Some fear a vacuum will be created into which radical actors can move. Others hope that the reform process will take hold, and think it will be easier to resolve the Abkhaz conflict once Shevardnadze has gone.

## Regional setting

The relationship with Russia, the former colonial power and the region's most powerful neighbour, is crucial for all three countries. Russia is a huge labour market for migrant workers from the Caucasus and the destination for most Caucasian goods, a source of energy supplies and investment, and represents the cultural and social heritage for many people who still get most of their news from Russian TV. It is also a military power determined to protect its interests in the region.

Following the demise of the USSR, Russia had four military bases in Georgia – Batumi in Ajara, Akhalkalaki in Javakheti, Gudauta in Abkhazia and Vaziani near Tbilisi. Georgia is determined that Russian troops should withdraw; it regards them as an obstacle to its sovereignty. According to the commitments undertaken by the Russian government at the 1999 Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Istanbul summit, the Vaziani base was closed in July 2001, the Russian troops withdrawn and most of the equipment transferred to the Russian base at Gumri, Armenia. The Gudauta base was closed in November 2001. The other two bases are located in minority-populated areas, where the local populations welcome the Russian presence for economic reasons, and because they regard it as a guarantee against a resurgence

of Georgian nationalism. The Georgian majority believe the minorities are manipulated by the Russians. Russia's role in conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and its assistance to Shevardnadze in suppressing Zviadists, contributed to the perception, in Georgia, that it is still in the grip of the former colonial power. Arguably, the Georgian elite's obsession with Russian neo-imperialism has obstructed the adoption of a more realistic approach to the country's internal problems.

Russia's second war in Chechnya (from 1999) and the rise of President Vladimir Putin to power have had significant implications for the South Caucasus. It signalled that Russia was now in a position to pursue coherent policies in the Caucasus. In December 2000, Russia introduced a visa requirement for Georgians visiting Russia, which hit Georgian migrant workers hard. Aliev immediately negotiated a visa-free agreement with Russia for Azerbaijan. He found a common cause with Moscow in combating Islamist penetration from the North Caucasus. Aliev agreed to cooperation between Azerbaijani and Russian intelligence agencies and engaged in talks on Russia's use of the military radar station in Gabala in Azerbaijan. In turn, Moscow has promised help in negotiations over Karabakh. This *rapprochement* sent worrying messages to Armenia, which fears isolation. Armenia welcomes the Russian military on its territory, and it considers Moscow its strategic ally. It has a joint air-defence system with Russia and benefits from its base in Gumri.

The USSR's demise opened the way for Turkey to play a role in the Caucasus and Central Asia. However, the region's needs are vast, while Turkey's resources are unable to compete with those of the West. Turkey's position is also complicated by its history and ethnic ties with the region. Armenian annexation of Karabakh and surrounding territories prevents the establishment of diplomatic relationships between the two states, though business interaction is robust.<sup>15</sup> Turkey supports Azerbaijan in the Karabakh dispute – politically rather than in the form of military aid. The existence of Caucasian diasporas in Turkey, such as Abkhaz, Lezgins and Chechens, complicates matters further. Although Turkish-Georgian official relations are good, Turkish private companies engage in commerce with the Abkhaz authorities, helping to break their isolation. Finally, Turkey's developing relationship with Russia is far too important to be jeopardized for the sake of a dispute over the Caucasus.

Iran aspired to use the Caucasus and Central Asia as a means to break out of international isolation.<sup>16</sup> A division of the Caspian Sea energy resources also touched upon Iranian interests, such as the dispute over an oilfield with Azerbaijan in 2001. Iran was careful to remain neutral over Karabakh, but maintained a good relationship with Armenia, partly because of an Armenian diaspora in Iran, and because of rivalry with Turkey. The most sensitive question is the existence of the Iranian Azeris, who outnumber their ethnic kin in the Republic of Azerbaijan. They are suspected of potential disloyalty to the Iranian state, and Azerbaijan is suspected of harbouring territorial aspirations. So far, tensions have been contained.

# Re-making the map: surviving apart

Initially, the separatist conflicts in the Caucasus brought about chaos and massive suffering. However, after nearly a decade of *de facto* independent existence, the breakaway republics of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Karabakh have established their own political personalities and the economic means to support themselves. Their populations are no worse off than those in the states from which they separated. Strengthened by a sense of siege, these republics have achieved a certain cohesion.

The prospects for resolution of the conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Karabakh are a matter of contention. The conflicts do not appear to impact greatly on everyday existence. Although most internally displaced people (IDPs) from Azerbaijan and Georgia continue to live in miserable conditions, so do many among the host populations. New economic arrangements, as well as business opportunities in the shadow economy, have taken shape. The worst consequences of the war have been overcome.

However, the emotional and ideological effects are still strongly felt. The predominant perception is that the unresolved conflicts are an obstacle to progress in building a viable state and a functioning economy. For the authorities, it is politically convenient to attribute failures in government or restrictions on democracy to the war-time situation. Among the people who lost out, this contributes to a feeling of low self-esteem, as far as national identity is concerned.

## Nagorno Karabakh

The conflict in Nagorno Karabakh, a predominantly ethnic Armenian area on the territory of Azerbaijan, dates back to 1988. As Soviet controls relaxed, Karabakh Armenian ethnic grievances surfaced: the perceived Azerbaijani policy of a denial of cultural rights to the Armenians, resettlement of ethnic Azeris into Karabakh (Armenians made up 94 per cent of the population in 1921, reduced to 76 per cent by 1979) and suspicion of deliberate under-investment in the region. Irrespective of the fairness of these arguments, these were deeply felt Armenian concerns. The desire for the region to be transferred from Azerbaijani to Armenian jurisdiction was at the heart of the dispute.<sup>17</sup>

In February 1988, as tensions were growing, the ethnically motivated killings of Armenians occurred in Sumgait, Azerbaijan. Moscow failed to act. The escalation of inter-ethnic tensions led to the expulsion of 185,000 Azeris and

11,000 Muslim Kurds from Armenia in 1988–9. A similar sequence of events in 1990 led to over 300,000 Armenians fleeing Azerbaijan. Fighting initially erupted in Karabakh and 47,000 Karabakh Azeris were forced to flee in 1991–2. In 1991 Karabakh proclaimed independence rather than unification with Armenia.<sup>18</sup>

Throughout the Soviet period, Moscow supported the Azerbaijani authorities against Armenian secessionists. In the early 1990s, success in the war swung between the two sides, but by the end of 1993 the Armenians had succeeded in pushing the Azeris out of Karabakh and in conquering six regions beyond. After the signing of the May 1994 ceasefire, some 520,000 Azeris from these regions fled their homes. In July, under Russia's mediation, Armenia and Azerbaijan committed themselves to maintain the ceasefire. A fair proportion of these Azeris want to return to their homes, though those who fled Karabakh may not want to live alongside Armenians. Many younger IDPs are believed to have migrated to Russia for work. The official policy of the Azerbaijan government is that all IDPs want to return. By contrast, Armenians who fled Azerbaijan see no possibility of returning.

The new Russia supported the Armenian cause, supplying weapons worth around \$1 billion.<sup>19</sup> They made a vital contribution to the Armenian victory.

Throughout the 1990s, Armenia has practically formed a common state with Karabakh. Military and political figures from Karabakh, including President Robert Kocharian, hold key positions in Armenia. The struggle has strengthened Armenian identity. Armenia's military superiority means that security concerns are low. The Armenian diaspora has financed a programme of reconstruction in Karabakh. However, Azerbaijan has cut road, rail and energy links with Armenia, supported by Turkey, which also closed its borders. Armenia has retaliated, closing its border with Nakhichevan, Azerbaijan.

## The Key West talks and beyond

In 1992 the OSCE Minsk Group was set up to resolve the Karabakh conflict. Russia became permanent co-chair of the Group in December 1994. In 1997 Presidents Aliiev and Ter-Petrosyan, under considerable international pressure, accepted the OSCE proposal for a phased settlement, but this was rejected by the Armenian political elite. Ter-Petrosyan was forced to resign by the Karabakh grouping led by Kocharian.

The issues of contention remain as follows:<sup>20</sup>

- The status of Karabakh: Karabakh and Armenia reject any subordination of Karabakh to Azer-

baijan, while the latter is prepared to grant only the highest degree of autonomy to it.

- Armenian withdrawal from Azerbaijani territory outside Karabakh.
- Security of Karabakh: the Armenian side insists on strong security guarantees in compensation for a withdrawal from the territories it currently holds.
- Return of Azeri refugees and IDPs, especially to Shusha.

In early 2001, the Karabakh peace talks gained significant momentum, culminating in the April Key West summit between the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia. As co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, France, Russia and the USA exerted concerted pressure.

Both Presidents are aware that the *status quo* is negative for their countries. President Aliev is ageing and would prefer to sign a peace settlement during his term of office. For President Kocharian, the isolation caused by the conflict undermines economic potential and causes an exodus of the population.

The contours of a deal may take shape as follows:<sup>21</sup> Azerbaijan receives back six of the seven occupied regions and an internationally protected road, linking it to Nakhichevan. In return, Karabakh and the Lachin corridor will be granted self-governing status, implying its *de facto* independence.<sup>22</sup>

Since the Key West talks, the peace process has stalled. The major obstacle to a peace settlement remains entrenched public opinion on both sides. The two Presidents seem to be 'ahead of their populations' in understanding the need for compromise and are unable to take their societies with them.<sup>23</sup>

Both fear they could be swept away by popular outrage if they signed a peace settlement. In Azerbaijan, there is no serious discourse on the shape of a settlement. The idea that Karabakh might be worth sacrificing to enable the return of displaced Azeris, cannot be safely articulated by Azeri politicians.

The level of enthusiasm for war in Azerbaijan is impossible to determine. Life has improved and people are more interested in the new economic opportunities. Azerbaijan does not exhibit a militant culture, but some observers believe that militancy may be on the rise, fed by frustration with the lack of progress in the peace process. The presence and the fighting spirit of Chechens, taking a break in Azerbaijan from their war, may act as a trigger for such moods.

The Azerbaijani army is weak and Aliev may be reluctant to strengthen it for fear of a coup such as the one which brought him to power. And the threat of further ethnic separatism remains: minority populations – such as Lezgins or Talysh – may not support the struggle for Karabakh, since they have their own grudges against the Baku authorities. How they would react to a new war is unclear.

This is also a matter of internal politics. Since the President is pursuing a peace strategy, opposition groups tend to engage in war propaganda.<sup>24</sup> After Aliev goes, the Karabakh issue could become a platform for bids for

power and tempt contenders into new militancy.

In Armenia, the sensation of a war victory is overwhelming and there are no real pressures on the Armenian side to give up its claim on Karabakh. Armenia does not suffer much from the blockade. Refugees from Azerbaijan who have resettled in Armenia have no desire to return. Less-developed Azerbaijan is not an attractive alternative for Karabakh Armenians, who can rely on the support of the Armenian state and diaspora.

While many in Armenia resent the burden of the unresolved conflict, the idea of giving up Karabakh in return for economic opportunities has no appeal. Armenians have felt victimized throughout history, but finally have asserted their own agenda.

Thus the stalemate is likely to continue indefinitely.

## Abkhazia

The conflict in Abkhazia also dates back to the Soviet period. Although tense throughout the post-war period, Georgian-Abkhaz inter-ethnic relations deteriorated after 1988, as did relations between the central government in Tbilisi, and Sukhum(i), the capital of Abkhazia. Cultural and language rights became the first focus of disension, followed by differences over power-sharing.<sup>25</sup>

In August 1992 the Georgian State Council ordered Georgian troops, comprised of paramilitaries led by the warlord Kitovani, to enter Abkhazia.<sup>26</sup> Although Shevardnadze denied sanctioning the action, which led to full-scale war, he subsequently endorsed it. The Abkhaz mobilized support from ethnically related peoples of the North Caucasus. They also benefited from Russian military support channelled through the Russian base in Gudauta.

Initially the Abkhaz lost most of the territory, but in March 1993 they launched a successful counter-offensive. In September over 200,000 Georgians fled Abkhazia.<sup>27</sup> In November 1999 the Abkhaz leadership proclaimed formal independence.

Various parts of the Russian establishment supported different sides during the conflict. The Russian foreign ministry and the military high command acted as mediators, while individual military regiments pursued their own political and business agendas on the ground.

Georgia has since sought to recover Abkhazia by exerting international pressure on the Abkhaz leadership. It secured economic restrictions on Abkhazia enforced by Russia. It attracted the Western powers to the peace process to provide a counterbalance to Russian influence. The Georgian authorities also gave tacit support to guerrilla groups, operating in the border zone to undermine Abkhaz security. IDPs in Georgia form an outspoken lobby, with influence in Parliament and with links to the paramilitaries operating in Abkhazia.

Little progress has been made in bilateral negotiations on the future political status of Abkhazia and the return of Georgian IDPs. Tbilisi wants Abkhazia to recognize that it is a subordinate part of the Georgian state, while guaranteeing self-rule. The Abkhaz leadership insists on internal sovereignty within a loose confederation, or outright independence. In autumn 2001 Abkhazia proclaimed the

desire to apply for 'associate status', with the Russian Federation.<sup>28</sup>

The Abkhaz feel no desire to enter a common state with Georgia, believing they would lose their security and their dominant political position. Reintegration would mean a mass return of Georgians, whom they fear might engage in acts of revenge, and would gradually come to outnumber the Abkhaz. Then there would be no superior arbiter to ensure Abkhaz rights. There is no discussion on the Georgian side about how to address this concern. The Abkhaz leadership asserts that they must never again allow themselves to become a minority – with a clear implication that full return is impossible.<sup>29</sup>

Since the end of the war, 'President' Ardzinba has consolidated his position. Ethnic Abkhaz are dominant in both the political and business arenas. The situation of minorities in Abkhazia – and Georgians are now one of them – is far from ideal. Power lies with the Abkhaz, although Armenians are numerically the largest group. However, with the notable exception of the Georgians, inter-ethnic relations are stable and the multi-ethnic nature of society in Abkhazia is preserved.

The economic viability of the breakaway region has improved due to rich agricultural land, *ad hoc* trade links with Russia and Turkey, and some revenue from the Black Sea resorts. Although economic life is far bleaker than was hoped, it does not differ significantly from conditions in the Georgian periphery. Russia's introduction of the visa regime for Georgian citizens wishing to travel to Russia, while exempting Abkhazia and South Ossetia, encouraged further incorporation of the latter territories into Russia's economic and social space.

The United Nations (UN) assumed the prime responsibility for resolution of the conflict in Abkhazia and, since 1992, has worked in an uneasy partnership with Russian official mediators. A Russian peacekeeping force (PKF) under the CIS mandate was agreed upon in May 1994. It is monitored by a UN observer mission (UNOMIG). The PKF and UNOMIG mandates are based on the right of return for all IDPs, and the preservation of Georgia's territorial integrity within the 1991 borders.

Moscow facilitated a series of high-level meetings between Georgian and Abkhaz officials, culminating in an agreement to renounce the use of force signed in August 1997. However, the Georgians accuse the PKF of failing to fulfil its mandate to secure the return of IDPs, lax imposition of border controls and reluctance to complete its withdrawal from the Gudauta base. Russia claims that the strength of local protests precluded the safe transport of weapons.<sup>30</sup>

The policy of the Abkhaz leadership has been to maintain the *status quo*. Frustration on the Georgian side has led to the emergence of a more confrontational approach. Since the late 1990s, Georgian guerrillas, with the covert aid of the Georgian security services, have penetrated as far as Sukhum(i). The Abkhaz leadership responded with punitive raids on Georgian returnees. In May 1998 fighting in the Gali region resulted in the expulsion by Abkhaz troops of Georgian paramilitaries and between 30,000 and 40,000 Georgian returnees.<sup>31</sup> The security situation in this area remains precarious. Kidnappings and killings of locals have been common, and over 90 Russian peace-

keepers have died in ambushes and mine explosions. UNOMIG was also targeted and six UN staff were killed in October 2001.

Tensions escalated throughout autumn 2001, as Chechen guerrillas traversed from the Pankissi Valley (see pp. 19–20) and joined forces with the Georgian paramilitaries. When Russia threatened to undertake inspection missions in Pankissi (and this could be endorsed by the West in the light of 'the war against terror'), the Georgian Interior Ministry organized their transit to Kodori where they 'engaged' in Abkhazia. Abkhazia quickly mobilized and forced the attackers to flee. The two sides stood on the brink of a new war, but the situation has calmed down since. Renewal of border fighting, however, remains a likely prospect.

The Georgian Parliament voted for the termination of the PKF mandate, complaining that both Abkhaz territorial gains and the displacement of ethnic Georgians are perpetuated by the PKF. Shevardnadze also threatened to take his country out of the CIS and reiterated its desire to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

In the Russian view, Georgia is either unable or unwilling to prevent what it sees as 'terrorist' activities inside the country. A spillover of instability from Georgia constitutes a security challenge that Russia cannot ignore. Hence the move to reinforce its border with Georgia and the reluctance to withdraw from Abkhazia. However, internal developments in Georgia are of diminishing priority for Russia.

Moscow has indicated that it would not oppose Georgia's withdrawal from the CIS, and has pulled out from the Gudauta base.<sup>32</sup> Putin announced he would consider removing Russian peacekeepers and urged Georgia to approach the UN to handle the ceasefire issue instead. Whether Moscow will also now move to restrict the presence of Georgian migrant workers in Russia to put new pressure on Georgia, remains to be seen.

## South Ossetia

The conflict in South Ossetia unfolded along similar lines, with mutually exclusive claims to territory combining with Ossetian fear of assimilation into the 'Georgian nation'. Georgians suspected that South Ossetians were in a privileged position *vis-à-vis* other regions of Georgia, benefiting from affirmative action practised by the Soviet system in respect of minorities. From 1989 to 1991, Georgians started to assert the primacy of Tbilisi's authority, and Georgian language and culture.

In August 1990 South Ossetia issued a declaration of sovereignty and demanded recognition from Moscow as an independent subject of the USSR. Tbilisi retaliated by abolishing South Ossetia as an administrative entity. Fighting soon erupted between Ossetian and Georgian militias and resulted in expulsion of the Georgians from Tskhinval(i), the region's capital. The Georgians then besieged and bombarded Tskhinval(i) from the surrounding hills.<sup>33</sup>

The fighting continued until the Ossetians, supported by North Caucasians, gained the upper hand in 1992. Population exchanges took place: Ossetians from other

parts of Georgia moved to South or North Ossetia, and most ethnic Georgians left.

A ceasefire was signed in June 1992. This was supervised by a combined Russian, Georgian and Ossetian peacekeeping force under a Joint Control Commission (JCC) on which North Ossetia was represented, together with Russia and the parties to the conflict. Negotiations were held under Russian auspices and supported by the OSCE mission established in 1992. In March 1994 the OSCE's mandate was extended to monitor peacekeeping operations. In May 1996 the parties signed a memorandum on refraining from the threat of force and supporting gradual demilitarization. By February 1997 hostilities had subsided to a level which permitted a reduction in peacekeeping and monitoring activities.

In South Ossetia the issue of repatriation is not so important as in Abkhazia, since both sides accepted population exchanges and some Georgians managed to return. There is also less ethnic resentment between Ossetians and Georgians, and people are free to travel and engage in commerce. The South Ossetian leadership has learned to perform a balancing act between its ethnic kin in Russia and the Georgians. Both sides agree that the resumption of hostilities is unlikely.

However, there is no progress on political status and other important issues. The exemption of South Ossetia from the Russian visa regime has the effect of advancing South Ossetia's integration into the Russian economic and social space.<sup>34</sup> The November 2001 presidential elections in South Ossetia brought the issue of its political future to the fore. The new South Ossetian 'President' Eduard Kokoev has pronounced pro-Ossetian and pro-Moscow leanings.





# The scope for further division

A part from virtually mono-ethnic Armenia, the region contains substantial ethnic and religious diversity. At the same time, political culture in the region is characterized by an exclusive ethnic nationalism so profound that faith in the viability of autonomy structures within wider federal arrangements is largely absent. Notions of power-sharing have little independent tradition in the region to draw upon, while the Soviet experience has shaped nationalist aspirations. There is little tradition of tolerance by majority populations of minorities, while for their part minorities seldom trust the states to ensure their well-being.

Governments in the region learnt the lesson from separatist conflicts in early 1990s that if they had denied the importance of ethnic identity and suppressed emerging secessionist tendencies from the start, it might have been possible to prevent separatism from becoming a mobilizing force. They are thus very wary of recognizing any level of ethnic demands from whatever source. Minorities are seen as susceptible to manipulation by outsiders, since many of them live in the border areas next to their kin states. This also discourages recognition of the legitimacy of any grievances they might have. Such an approach differs significantly from the view, promoted by Minority Rights Group International (MRG), among others, that protecting and promoting minority rights can defuse tensions and reduce grievances, thus helping to avoid conflicts.

## New developments

Two powerful currents – towards depopulation and mono-ethnicity – have become distinctive features of the South Caucasus in the independence period. An estimated 3.5 million labour migrants have left the three countries, mainly for Russia. Up to 2 million Azerbaijani citizens, over a million Armenians and an unknown, but substantial number of Georgians currently work in Russia. Some Azeri and Georgian citizens also go to Turkey, while many seek to migrate to Western Europe.

Minorities are more prone to emigrate than the majorities.<sup>35</sup> Their access to educational and professional opportunities is increasingly restricted by their lack of proficiency in the state language and by the withering away of Russian, which remains the *lingua franca* in the Caucasus. The pressure of popular attitudes and media coverage, the insularity of the patronage networks and titular groups, and a new religious zeal, combine to create an atmosphere where minorities experience discomfort, and

fear restricted prospects for their children.

Those who can leave, do so. Russians and other Slavs, Jews and Greeks have been rapidly disappearing. Most Russians have already left Armenia,<sup>36</sup> where they constituted 2.7 per cent of the population in 1989. Russians are also leaving Georgia, where in 1989 they amounted to 7 per cent of the total population. According to the 1999 census, the Russian population in Azerbaijan fell to a third of its 1979 level, with 141,700 officially registered. The current estimates are that about 100,000 actually live in the country.<sup>37</sup> Those who stay are disproportionately older people, women in mixed marriages or widows. The intermingling of ethnic groups of the Soviet era is diminishing.

The same trend affects smaller indigenous groups, such as the Avar, Laz, Tat and Tsakhur. As state support for their languages and culture diminishes, there is an intensification of the fear they might disappear altogether as distinct communities. The practice of registering some representatives of minority groups as members of the titular groups diminishes their official proportion; this is regarded by the states as an important aspect of nation-building.

Ethnic conflict has also contributed to the tendency towards mono-ethnicity. Prior to the outbreak of the Karabakh conflict, Armenians constituted the third most numerous minority in Azerbaijan (390,500 or 5.6 per cent in 1989), 180,000 of them in Baku. Officially, 645 Armenians lived in Azerbaijan in 1999, while the real figure is estimated to be around 3,000,<sup>38</sup> since many are in mixed marriages and have changed family names. Virtually no Azeris remain in Armenia.

Having gained freedom from Soviet rule and the ability to build their own states, the majority of ordinary people in the Caucasus have lost out in terms of social and economic well-being. The standard of healthcare, education and social security, and access to these services, have been vastly reduced. Social standards in the provinces continue to deteriorate. Increasingly, poor families in the provinces send only boys to school.

Although Caucasian elites have become more cosmopolitan, the societies have become more inward-looking. Access to information and wider networks becomes more problematic, as Russian dies out as a *lingua franca*. Azerbaijan appears to be the least affected, with the Russian language remaining popular. Also, the Azeri and Turkish languages are mutually understandable and ties with Turkey are growing.

As many minorities live in remote areas, many suffer from the poor road infrastructure, which contributes to the sense of isolation. This also precludes the development of trade, often leading to barter exchange between

regions. Money is chiefly supplied to the minority areas by remittances from family members working abroad.

Women have been affected in a number of ways. First, with many traditionally male jobs gone, women have become breadwinners for the family. Second, provision of childcare, healthcare and education for children – all traditional women's responsibilities – has sharply deteriorated. Third, male labour migration has left many wives on their own, neither properly married nor free, while husbands often set up new families abroad. Fourth, the traditional norms and values associated with patriarchal societies have been reinforced. Thus, women are caught between the need to provide for the family and restrictions on their social freedom. Women in minority groups suffer from the same challenges, but more so.

## Armenia

Minority groups occupy a modest place in the demographic structure of Armenia. After Kurds (mostly Yezidis), Russians are the second largest minority. The Russians are made up of two different groups: those in the cities, mainly in Yerevan, many in mixed marriages, and surviving religious communities of Molokans which fled religious persecution in Tsarist Russia and moved to Armenia in the early nineteenth century. According to the Foundation for Assistance to Russian Compatriots in Armenia, there are 5,000 Molokans in the country. Many Molokans do not identify themselves as Russians, since they have their own religion.<sup>39</sup>

### Kurds and Yezidis

According to Kurdish sources, sizeable communities of Kurds exist in the South Caucasus. The Kurdish Human Rights Project (KHRP) claims that an estimated 75,000 Kurds (1.8 per cent of the population) live in Armenia, and 200,000 (2.8 per cent) in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's treatment of its Kurdish population (such as denial of separate identity) is greatly affected by the Karabakh conflict.<sup>40</sup>

The majority of the Kurds remaining in Armenia are Yezidis;<sup>41</sup> most Muslim Kurds left Armenia at the beginning of the Karabakh conflict (1988–9). The Kurds consider Yezidis as belonging to the Kurdish group,<sup>42</sup> which is consistent with the Soviet pattern of registering ethnic groups by linguistic affiliation rather than by self-identification. The Yezidis in Armenia insist on their separate identity based on their distinct religion, which includes elements of sun worship, Christianity and Zoroastrianism. Outside Armenia, the Yezidis are adamant as to their Kurdish identity.<sup>43</sup> Still, the existence of a strong Kurdish bond with Armenia is apparent. For instance, the arrest of Abdullah Ojalan, President of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) led to protests in Yerevan in support of the Kurdish National Liberation Movement.<sup>44</sup>

The first Kurdish migration to Armenia was in the mid-nineteenth century, while many Yezidis settled in Armenia in 1915–20, following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. In 1989, Kurds numbered 56,000 in Armenia (1.8 per cent), the number remaining now is estimated at

less than 50,000. Yezidis are mainly rural (only 8 per cent are urban-dwellers). Most of them currently live in Oktemberian and Echmiadzin provinces and are engaged in cattle-breeding. Some villages are Yezidi only, but mixed villages also exist. Their communities are structured on religious and clan principles: each one is headed by a sheikh whose status is hereditary and whose authority is universally accepted. Levels of education among the Yezidis are much lower than among the Armenian majority: in 1989 only 1.3 per cent had higher education and over 20 per cent did not have primary education. The situation has worsened since, especially for girls, who generally marry at an early age (13–14 years old).

Contacts with Armenians are reduced to a minimum, with an almost total absence of mixed marriages. However, the relationship with Molokans is much closer and Yezidi-Molokan villages are more intermixed. Since independence the situation of Yezidis has worsened as the social and cultural distance between them and the majority population has widened. The gradual disappearance of preferential treatment for minorities has meant a reduction of social opportunities (see Minorities in the new states, pp. 22–4).

From the early 1990s Yezidis began to migrate for economic reasons, mainly to Russia and to Germany, where a Kurdish diaspora exists. Yezidis, however, note that such migration is temporary and they do not have any homeland other than Armenia.

## Azerbaijan

Increasingly, minorities in Azerbaijan are associated with a growing religious zeal. The North Caucasian groups – Avars, Chechens, Lezgins and Tsakhurs – are predominantly Sunni Muslims. It is believed that radical Islam is gaining influence among these groups. The proximity of the Talysh people in southern Azerbaijan to the Iranian border is believed to reinforce Iran's religious influence.

The new Islamic movements that started to develop primarily in Dagestan and in Central Asia during the 1980s, were explicitly against the political system based on secular authority. At the time of *perestroika* they were easily interpreted as a democratic voice of civil society. Throughout the 1990s, a different aspect of Islamic radicalism became apparent. The first Russian campaign in Chechnya, and the post-war turmoil there, gave rise to Islamic radicalism calling for a political order based on God-given legitimacy. The role of Islamist fighters in the victories over Russian troops gained them respect among the young men, and their international networks, financial backing, discipline and courage created an appealing image.<sup>45</sup> During the second Russia-Chechen war, Islamist fighters became the backbone of the resistance, and the quest for independence turned more into a 'religious' war.

The Azerbaijani authorities and much of the population are concerned about the rise of radical Islam among the North Caucasian groups. For instance, in the Khachmaz region, in the north of the country, Islamists from Dagestan and Chechnya started to appear among

the Lezgins. Their unfamiliar religious rituals caused apprehension among traditional Muslims. The Aliiev regime keeps a close watch on these developments.

### Northern Azerbaijan

North Caucasian groups in Azerbaijan include Avars, Chechens (among them many newcomers), Lezgins,<sup>46</sup> Tsakhurs and other smaller groups. Some 250,000 Lezgins live on both sides of the River Samur in southern Dagestan (Russia), while there are 178,000 (2.2 per cent of population, 1999 census) in northern Azerbaijan. Local experts estimate that the real numbers are 250,000–260,000.<sup>47</sup> They have been divided since 1860, but only after the break-up of the USSR, when the border with Azerbaijan became international rather than merely administrative, did Lezgins find themselves in the position of a truly divided people.

Currently, Lezgins are the second largest group in Azerbaijan. They live in Gussary where they constitute 91 per cent of the population, in Khachmaz, Sheki and Quba regions, and Baku is 15 per cent Lezgin.

Tensions between Lezgins and Azeris began in 1992, but reached a peak in mid-1994 – after the period of heavy casualties on the Karabakh front and resistance to conscription to the Azerbaijani army – with violent clashes between Lezgins and Azeris in Derbent, Dagestan, and in the Gussary region of Azerbaijan. The Karabakh war has exacerbated inter-ethnic tensions in Azerbaijan, leading the authorities to adopt the position that the Karabakh situation must be resolved before other minority issues can be tackled.

In Dagestan, in 1991, the Sadval political movement called for the creation of an independent Lezgistan. The Dagestani authorities never supported this claim and it was officially rejected by Sadval in April 1996. However, the fear of assimilation and the perception of a threat to their community remain powerful, especially since division poses the threat that a distinctive Lezgin identity might be weakened.

Azerbaijan's reluctance to join the CIS in 1992–3, and its rejection of Russian border guards to police the Azerbaijani-Iranian border led to a tightening of the Azerbaijani-Russian border regime, and border closure during the first Chechen campaign (1994–6). The border reopened in 1996, but the issue of division continues to have an effect; border controls bring about militarization and smuggling, and raise the question of dual citizenship. Dagestan acknowledges the problem of division, but Azerbaijan does not, because of the implications for the issue of Azeris divided between Iran and Azerbaijan.

Most Lezgins are bi- or trilingual, speaking Lezgin, Azeri and Russian. The Azerbaijan state promotes the Lezgin language and culture. There is state sponsorship for Lezgin-language newspapers and radio programmes. A Lezgin National Drama Theatre was established in 1992 in Gussary. A branch of the Baku Teachers' Training College is located in Gussary and prepares students to teach Lezgin in primary schools. It is also a centre of scholarship for the language and invites Lezgin students from Dagestan to train there. There appears to be a substantial commitment among senior Lezgins to maintain Lezgin

language and culture.

The main language of instruction in schools in Azerbaijan is either Azeri or Russian, but in primary schools with many Lezgin pupils, two sessions a week are offered in the Lezgin language. In the Lezgin areas of Dagestan, Lezgin is the language of instruction in primary schools, as was the case in Soviet Azerbaijan. The transfer to the Latin script from the Cyrillic since 1 August 2001 for Azeri and Lezgin was unpopular with Lezgins. They claim that their relationship with their ethnic kin in Russia will suffer, as the latter continue with the Cyrillic script. The authorities, however, remain unmoved.

The Avars live in Zakataly and Belokany regions in the north of the country, numbering some 50,000 (0.6 per cent of the population of Azerbaijan),<sup>48</sup> while the majority of the Avars live in Dagestan where they constitute the largest ethnic group, numbering 600,000. Inter-ethnic relations in the north are prone to tensions, especially over crime and the actions of law enforcement agencies. Throughout 2001, violent clashes have erupted between the locals and the police, who are predominantly ethnic Azeris.

There are also reports that Chechens, another north Caucasian group, have carried out terrorist acts in the border areas. These attacks started in June 2001 and have escalated since. About 20,000 Chechens who escaped the fighting in Chechnya are living in Azerbaijan. The authorities do not recognize their presence, either by registering them as refugees or by treating them as illegal migrants. Among the local population, Chechens have a reputation for crime and drug smuggling. Chechens hold the Azeris in low esteem as they lost the war for Karabakh. Their presence encourages the spread of a militant mood, reinforced by the Chechens' willingness to fight for Karabakh.<sup>49</sup>

### Southern Azerbaijan

The Talysh are an Iranian people who adhere to Shi'a Islam. They live in south-eastern Azerbaijan, mainly in the Lenkoran and Massaly region, and are overwhelmingly rural (97 per cent). In Soviet times the Talysh were, on occasion, omitted from the census, but, in 1989, 21,200 Talysh were registered (0.3 per cent of population). The 1999 census reported 76,800 Talysh (1 per cent). Some Azeri experts believe that between 200,000 and 250,000 Talysh live in Azerbaijan, but the authorities are reluctant to admit this.<sup>50</sup>

In July 1993, at the time of general turmoil in Azerbaijan which ended APF rule, a 'Talysh-Mugan Republic' in Lenkoran was proclaimed by an associate of Surat Husseinov, the coup leader in Baku. Far from being a popular movement, the move reflected an ill-fated opportunism which was easily crushed by the Aliiev regime. The leader was given a lengthy jail sentence. Currently, it is claimed that Iranian influence is growing in the Lenkoran area, which is becoming visibly more Muslim with new mosques and *madrassas* established with financial backing from Iran.

## Georgia

### Armenians

Armenians are the largest minority in Georgia. In 1989 they numbered 437,200 (8.1 per cent), a substantial number of them concentrated in Tbilisi (over 150,000 or 12 per cent of the city's population). Now, the most vibrant part of the community has emigrated and about 350,000 Armenians remain.<sup>51</sup> They have lost most of their economic and political significance in the capital.

Outside the capital, the Armenians are concentrated in Javakheti, a remote southern region of Georgia, bordering Turkey and Armenia, where Armenians constitute nearly 95 per cent.<sup>52</sup> It currently forms a part of the Samtskhe-Javakheti province, Samtskhe being a mixed Georgian-Armenian area. Javakheti itself consists of two districts – Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda.

Many Armenians currently living in Javakheti are the descendants of those who arrived in the region fleeing Ottoman persecution.<sup>53</sup> Perceptions of a 'Turkish threat', the high degree of group cohesion and the distinct identity of a mountain people remain strong. In Soviet times, the region was closed to outsiders. Because of its significance for security, social and economic development was artificially maintained at a level above the national average. In the 1990s, these industries have mostly collapsed and currently it is difficult to sustain a livelihood.

Historical and cultural factors contribute to a sense of insularity, exclusive ethnic identity and suspicion of outsiders. They are reinforced by an almost homogeneous ethnic composition, no knowledge of Georgian and poor communications with the rest of the country.<sup>54</sup>

A move to unite Javakheti with the low-lying territories of Samtskhe aroused resentment because it was interpreted as an attempt to make the region more 'Georgian'. An administrative centre was set up in Akhaltsikhe, a town poorly connected with Javakheti. Administrative reform, aimed at creating larger units, also caused resentment in other, more ethnically homogeneous regions of Georgia.<sup>55</sup> The Javakheti Armenians are negative about the mainly Georgian composition of the provincial administration and the presence of numerous Tbilisi appointees.

The region has two political groupings, Javakh and Virk. Javakh was influential in the early 1990s and is reputed to have played a calming role during the rise of nationalism under Gamsakhurdia. Since then it has lost most of its influence.<sup>56</sup> Virk is now a more credible political force.<sup>57</sup> Virk advocates the administrative separation of Javakheti from Samtskhe, and the formation of an autonomous Javakheti within Georgia.<sup>58</sup> Autonomy is regarded as a security guarantee rather than a means of change. Virk applied to be registered as a political party in Georgia but was rejected. The authorities offered to register Virk as a social organization, but Virk declined.

Javakheti hosts the 62nd Russian base at Akhalkalaki. Close relations between the Russian military and the Armenians in Javakheti are regarded as a security threat by the Georgian majority. Tbilisi insists on withdrawal by 2004, while Russia would like to preserve the base until 2015. Russia views the base as essential to maintaining its

own security in the volatile Caucasus region. Georgian units were supposed to replace the Russian troops along the Turkish border after their withdrawal in 1999, but this plan caused such resentment in Javakheti that a full deployment proved impossible.

The Akhalkalaki base is essential to Javakheti's economy. Employment is dominated by the base, which also provides a market for local produce and imports from Russia. Georgia's campaign to close the base is strongly resented. The local fear is that Turkish troops would move in as a part of a NATO strategy to replace Russian forces, or that Georgian troops would enter the region. This latter poses a more immediate risk of conflict, as the population is armed and a minor incident could escalate into violence.

The exemption of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from the Russian visa regime for Georgian citizens is a source of envy in Javakheti, as many local males go to Russia for employment. The feeling is that the Armenians are being punished for a problem which the Georgian state has with Moscow. Many are seeking to obtain either a Russian passport, via the military base, or an Armenian passport, so as to travel freely.

The relationship between Georgia and Armenia is tense, but both leaders have a stake in promoting stability. Shevardnadze seeks to avoid another ethnic conflict, while Kocharian is aware that Georgia offers the only transit route to Russia and Europe out of landlocked and isolated Armenia. In 2001, Shevardnadze paid an official visit to Yerevan, assuring the Armenian officials that his government is committed to its promises of development for the Javakheti Armenians. During this visit, a new bilateral treaty on friendship, mutual security and cooperation was signed.

The Presidents, however, are under severe pressure from the public. In Georgia, anti-Armenian sentiment and xenophobic attitudes are on the rise. In Armenia, the opposition accuses the President of failure to act on Armenian concerns: pressure on Armenians to leave mixed areas in Georgia; Armenians being pushed out of political and economic positions in the capital; inadequate development in Javakheti (the only electricity the region has comes from Armenia); problems with transit; and military cooperation between Turkey and Azerbaijan.

In September 2001, an Armenian parliamentary delegation called on the Council of Europe (CoE) to send European monitors on a fact-finding visit to Javakheti.<sup>59</sup> Georgia's plans to repatriate Meskhetian Turks (see p. 20) – which ethnic Armenians vehemently oppose – may be another explanation for the Armenian stand at the CoE, since repatriation of Meskhetian Turks constituted one of the conditions for Georgia's CoE membership.

### Ajarians

Ajara, on the Black Sea coast, was, like Abkhazia, an autonomous republic within the Union Republic of Georgia. Since the break-up of the USSR, it has enjoyed almost complete independence, although being nominally loyal to Tbilisi. Batumi, the capital of Ajara, offers an alternative political centre to Tbilisi. Its leader, Aslan Abashidze rules the republic as his own fiefdom, and

members of his family occupy key political and economic positions. However, Ajara enjoys relative stability and some development.

Having learnt bitter lessons in the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Shevardnadze sticks to a 'non-interference into internal affairs' approach to Ajara. The laws governing the Ajara legislature, judiciary and security forces are of local making, with lip-service only paid to the territorial integrity of Georgia. Most importantly, the central authorities cannot persuade Batumi to part with a share of the considerable income from customs the port of Batumi levies on transit.

Georgian border troops on Ajara territory are controlled by the Abashidze leadership which practices local recruitment. The Russian military base at Batumi, another bone of contention between Russia and Georgia, also employs largely local personnel. Tbilisi would like the Russian troops to leave as soon as possible, while the Russian side seeks to secure basing rights till 2015. Whether Russian withdrawal would bring Ajara back under Tbilisi's control, however, is doubtful.

In a decade of *de facto* self-rule, Ajarian separate identity has been reinforced, while respect for the Tbilisi authorities has diminished. The improved economic situation is another reason why changes to the *status quo* would be unwelcome.

Abashidze is also suspected of cherishing nation-wide political ambitions. His Revival Union Party takes part in Georgian elections, which serves to familiarize the electorate with the Ajara leader, especially in the minority areas such as Javakheti, where dissatisfaction with the central authorities is widespread.

## Azeris

The Azeris are currently the second largest minority in Georgia, concentrated mainly in the rural areas along the border with Azerbaijan (in the province of Kvemo-Kartli). In 1989 they numbered 307,5000 (5.7 per cent), 18,000 of them in Tbilisi (1.4 per cent). During the *perestroika* and Gamsakhurdia periods, Azeris articulated demands for autonomy to elevate their status within Georgia. However, a lack of support from Azerbaijan and the cautious policies of the Georgian leadership diffused tensions.<sup>60</sup>

Currently, the Governor of Kvemo-Kartli is eager to demonstrate the region's loyalty to Tbilisi. The local Azeris are likely to remain passive as they are aware that the Aliev regime would not intervene on their behalf. Moreover, around 15,000 ethnic Georgians live in the Zakataly region of Azerbaijan, so both sides have a stake in promoting inter-ethnic peace.

Many abuses and much violence occur because of existing border and customs arrangements. Smugglers crossing the border are occasionally killed by Georgian border guards, which arouses local protests. Policing ethnically mixed areas is also an issue, as the police are drawn mainly from the Georgian group.

Otherwise, the same issues of language (many people speak only Azeri), education, labour migration, political participation, and access to information (the population watches TV from Azerbaijan and occasionally from

Turkey) and law affect the Azeri minority in the same way as the Javakheti Armenians. The Azeri minority has six MPs out of 235. In 2001, some schools using Azeri as the medium of instruction were closed in Azeri-populated areas in Georgia. Plans have been drawn up to change the names of some Azeri villages. This has led some representatives of the intelligentsia of Azerbaijan to issue an appeal to President Shevardnadze.<sup>61</sup>

## The North Caucasians

Numerically small groups of Chechens and ethnically closely related Kists have recently become a focus of much publicity because of the conflicts in Chechnya and Abkhazia, and because of Islamist terrorism.

Kists live in the Pankissi Valley in Kakhetia, Georgia, in the north of the Akhmeta region, on the border with Chechnya. Pankissi is populated by Kists (8,000 people or 65 per cent), Georgians (24 per cent) and Ossetians (11 per cent).<sup>62</sup> Traditional norms have been reinforced in the wake of the Soviet collapse: the *teip*, or clan, is headed by an elder whose authority is respected by all other *teip* members. Women have minimal rights and are subordinate to men. The honour of women and girls is closely watched and violations are severely punished. Forced marriages, bride kidnappings, and killings of women and girls by family members for 'dishonouring the family' are on the increase. Blood vengeance is a living custom.

The security situation in Pankissi is one of the worst in the Caucasus. Traditionally high birth rates and a lack of local sources of employment encouraged migration to Russia, but now such opportunities have been severely reduced. Since the first Russian war in Chechnya, in which some Kist young men took part, heroin and arms trade networks have established bases and routes through the valley, benefiting from the fact that the authority of the Georgian state does not penetrate inside Pankissi.

There is widespread possession of firearms among the population, which makes effective policing difficult; no credible attempts at disarmament have been undertaken. Even when the Kist population in general does not support the criminals, arrests are difficult; relatives of alleged criminals will try to obstruct arrests in every way. Fear of blood vengeance also complicates effective cooperation between the locals and the police.

After Russia's first war in Chechnya ended in 1996, the relationship between the Georgian leadership and the Aslan Maskhadov government of *de facto* independent Chechnya greatly improved, the role of Chechen fighters in Abkhazia notwithstanding.<sup>63</sup> The Chechen leadership sought to break out of the Russian-imposed isolation and Georgia provided the only available exit route. Moreover, both had grievances against Moscow. In return for Shevardnadze's cooperation, Maskhadov offered his help in diffusing tensions in Pankissi, but to little effect.

The second Russian war in Chechnya led to refugee flows into Georgian territory and into Pankissi. In May 2000, according to the Georgian Ministry for Refugees and Forced Migrants, they numbered 7,148, but, by October, 1,600 had returned. Russia claimed that Chechen and 'international terrorists' move into Pankissi disguised as refugees, and that the valley serves as a rehabilitation cen-

tre and a source of arms and ammunition. Georgia denies this, but international diplomats in Georgia admit that Russia has a case.<sup>64</sup> Moscow asked Georgia for the right of passage for its troops to conduct border checks in Pankissi, or to undertake joint police patrols together with Georgian forces. After the rejection of both proposals, Russia closed its border with Georgia and introduced a visa regime for Georgian citizens. The autumn 2001 attacks on Abkhazia by Chechen fighters who came from Pankissi confirmed the presence of fighters in the valley.<sup>65</sup> The US *chargé d'affaires* in Georgia stated on 11 February 2002 that several dozen fighters from Afghanistan are in Pankissi Gorge; they maintain contact with Khattab, a Jordanian-born Chechen warlord who is associated with bin Laden. The *chargé d'affaires* concluded that the Pankissi Gorge had become a security threat to Georgia and that the US was ready to provide help to combat Islamic fighters there.

Interconfessional tensions bring additional fault lines. Kists are traditionally Sunni Muslims. Radical Islam started to penetrate Pankissi during the first war in Chechnya, when Kist volunteers came into contact with Islamist fighters. Such ties were further reinforced in the inter-war period. Tsinubani, a former Ossetian village where Georgian police do not venture, became a stronghold of radical Islam. Fighters captured in the attacks on Abkhazia admitted to the existence of training camps in Pankissi.<sup>66</sup>

Pankissi Christians also appear to be undergoing some religious shifts. Orthodox Christian Georgians and Ossetians have been converted by Protestant missionaries who supplement religious propaganda with distribution of aid conditional on attendance at prayers.<sup>67</sup> The lasting impact of such measures may be questionable.

In the 1990s, inter-ethnic relations in Pankissi deteriorated. First, following the outbreak of the conflict in South Ossetia, many Ossetians had to leave other regions of Georgia, including Pankissi. The lack of employment contributed to the exodus. As the young and able-bodied left and only the old remained, Kists moved into vacated Ossetian villages. The remaining Ossetian population is subjected to harassment by groups of Kist men, while the mainly ethnic Georgian police is paralysed in the face of growing crime. The Ingush-Ossetian conflict of 1992 in the Russian Federation served as the first point of discord, since Kists are closely ethnically related to the Ingush. Many Kists acquired arms during the first Russian war in Chechnya. Since then, the situation has deteriorated, with increased looting of livestock, and beatings and kidnappings of Ossetians, Pshavs and Tushins. Representatives of these groups appealed first to President Shevardnadze, with no result, then to Ludwig Chibirov, the 'President' of South Ossetia, and to the President of North Ossetia (Russian Federation). Chibirov invited ethnic Ossetians from Pankissi to move to South Ossetia.

Local Ossetians complain that law enforcement bodies do nothing to stop looting, beatings and drug-dealing. The inhabitants of some Ossetian and Georgian villages say that they are powerless against the pressure to leave. Kists made Ossetians leave Tsinubani, traditionally an Ossetian village, and introduced *Shari'a* law there. Elsewhere the situation is little better. Those who identify bandits can be beaten to death. Valuable woods are being chopped down

and smuggled out of Pankissi, and the harvest is often looted. Ossetians are scared to let their children attend school. Mostly retired people stay, while the young ones try to leave.<sup>68</sup> Relations with ethnic Georgian villages in surrounding Kakhetia are tense in a different way: Kakhetian villagers have set up local self-defence groups, claiming that, since the state is powerless to protect them, they have no other option.

The local people believe that the deterioration of security and increased inter-ethnic tension has been compounded by the influx of refugees from Chechnya.<sup>69</sup> The refugees, however, claim that it is simply convenient to blame them. The relationship between the local population and the refugees is increasingly tense.<sup>70</sup> The worst factor – which all the inhabitants of Pankissi agree upon – is the complete paralysis of central and local law enforcement agencies, which have simply ceased governing Pankissi.

Since independence and the period of radical nationalism in Georgia, attitudes towards the Avars, who live in the Kvareli region of Kakhetia, have deteriorated. Since 1989, pressure has been put on the Avars to leave. When Georgian paramilitaries besieged the Avar village of Tivi in June 1990, the Avars appealed to the Dagestan authorities for help. The decision was taken to resettle Kvareli Avars in Sukhokumsk.<sup>71</sup> After Gamsakhurdia's fall from power, tensions eased and many Avars chose to stay, but they continue to feel uneasy in independent Georgia.

### Repatriation of Meskhetians

Meskhetian Muslims, or Meskhetian Turks<sup>72</sup> (the majority self-identify as being of Turkish origin, but some consider themselves Muslims of Georgian descent) were deported in 1944 from Samtskhe-Javakheti to Central Asia. In 1989, Meskhetians survived a *pogrom* in Uzbekistan. They were airlifted out by Soviet troops and resettled in Azerbaijan (where some have become Azerbaijani citizens), in Ukraine and in South Russia, where their presence is resented both by the population and the regional authorities. According to the last Soviet census of 1989, Meskhetians numbered 207,500; current estimates for the Meskhetian population are between 270,000 and 320,000. In 2001, between 90,000 and 110,000 lived in Azerbaijan, where state policies and attitudes on the whole are favourable.<sup>73</sup> Azerbaijan, careful not to upset its relationship with Georgia, supports the Meskhetian right to return, but this is conditional on Georgia's acceptance.<sup>74</sup>

The Meskhetian minority organizations are Vatan, registered in 1994 in Russia, and Hsna, registered in Georgia in 1992. Vatan adheres to the Turkic origin of the Meskhetians, while Hsna united those who were prepared to accept the Georgian version of their origins for the sake of a speedy return. The Union of Georgian Repatriants and the Latifshah Baratashvili Foundation were established later, in Georgia, by those frustrated by Hsna's inability to achieve tangible progress with regard to the return of Meskhetians to Georgia.<sup>75</sup>

As a condition for joining the CoE in 1999, Georgia committed itself to repatriate the Meskhetians over a twelve-year period. A draft law on repatriation was presented to the CoE in March 2001. However, because of

the history of real or perceived ethnic clashes with Georgians and Armenians in the period prior to their deportation,<sup>76</sup> there have been threats to resist the return by force. The regional administrations are in sympathy with their populations and the national media echoes these sentiments.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM), together with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), led efforts to move Meskhetians back to Georgia throughout the 1990s.<sup>77</sup> The Forced Migration Project of the Open Society Institute (Soros Foundation) sought to mobilize civil society resources for this purpose. International gatherings in the Hague (September 1998) and Vienna (March 1999) gave the Meskhetian issue a high profile. However, only 650 have succeeded in returning to Georgia. Moreover, between 1994 and 1997, Meskhetians were unable to obtain Georgian citizenship, which began to be granted to a few only under the combined pressure of the UNHCR and the OSCE.

Those Meskhetians who managed to return consider themselves Georgians converted to Islam by the Turks when Meskhetia was conquered in 1578.<sup>78</sup> They are encouraged to acquire, or restore, Georgian surnames.<sup>79</sup> Tbilisi also argues that, for the sake of inter-ethnic peace, it is more feasible to resettle Meskhetians around the country rather than return them to their ethnic homeland.

It is unlikely that Meskhetians want to return *en masse* to the inhospitable land of southern Georgia, with its harsh climate, lack of infrastructure and paralysed economy, and from where the local population seeks to emigrate.<sup>80</sup> For many Meskhetians, the desire to return takes the form of a political demand expressing what they see as a historical right.

Some Meskhetians have opted for emigration to Turkey. The latter has sponsored the resettlement of 5,000 Meskhetians in eastern Anatolia, but discourages further immigration.



# Minorities in the new states

## Minorities and religion

In post-Soviet times, religion has begun to play a prominent role in the Caucasus. Religion serves as a pillar of national identity, and also offers spiritual guidance and psychological comfort in the post-independence period of turmoil and hardship. Socially, it serves to assert one's identity versus other groups, and sometimes it is used as a political weapon.

In all three states, the church is separated from the state. Armenians and Georgians are generally Christian and Azeris are Shi'a Muslims. The states also respect the existence and practices of other traditional creeds. In Azerbaijan the Russian Orthodox Church is free to function (in 1989 Muslims made up 87 per cent of the population, Christians were 12 per cent and Jews 0.5 per cent; in 1999 Orthodox and Gregorian Christians made up slightly over 2 per cent and 8,900 Jews were officially registered, 0.1 per cent). Yezidis in Armenia and Muslim groups (such as Azeris and Chechens) in Georgia are also free to practise their religion. All three states have tiny groups of practising Jews.

Non-traditional religious minorities, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, are harassed in all three countries and enjoy protection in the Caucasian states only as a result of pressure from the international community. In Armenia, their problems are with the state law according to which they are persecuted as conscientious objectors to military service.<sup>81</sup> In Georgia, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists and Pentecostals suffer more from violent attacks by right-wing Orthodox groups, with the covert support of the local authorities and the police, which the government appears powerless to prevent.<sup>82</sup>

In September 1999 an EU parliamentary delegation issued a public statement condemning violent attacks on religious minorities, journalists and NGOs, and urging religious tolerance. Human Rights Watch has been critical of the US government for its reluctance to take a firm public stand on religious minorities' issues, attributing the stance to prevailing strategic considerations.<sup>83</sup>

In Armenia persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses is linked to conscription and the lack of a law on alternative military service. Many Jehovah's Witnesses have been imprisoned as a result. In Azerbaijan, too, there is little tolerance of non-traditional groups. However, after a spate of attacks on evangelical Christians in 1999, President Aliiev made a statement committing the country to greater religious freedom. This prompted the authorities' registration of the Jehovah's Witnesses in December 1999.

Russian Christian minorities, such as Dukhobors and

Molokans, who fled religious persecution in Tsarist Russia and settled in remote areas of the Caucasus, are under increasing local pressure to leave, although there are no state-sponsored policies to expel them. The complaints are that some local groups move into their villages, harassing women and children, while the police do not act. As a result, in Javakheti, for instance, only 800 Dukhobor remain out of a 3,500-strong community 10 years ago.

In mostly Muslim Azerbaijan, small groups of adherents of the once-dominant pre-Islamic Zoroastrian religion are found. The prophet Zaratushtra, believed to be born in the seventh century BCE in present-day Azerbaijan, established a religion focused on the world's duality expressed through a cosmic struggle between a supreme god and an evil spirit. After the Islamic conquest, many Zoroastrians fled to India and, until the Soviet regime ended the practice, used to undertake pilgrimage to Azerbaijan to worship at sacred sites on the Apsheron Peninsula. Public attitudes towards Zoroastrians in Azerbaijan are tolerant. There are Zoroastrian believers in Armenia as well.

## State policies

The interrelationship between the poor economic situation in the three South Caucasian countries, variations in access to political patronage networks and the position of minorities, is crucial in assessing developments with regard to minorities. Provinces generally lag behind the capitals in levels of economic well-being: gas and electricity supplies, roads and infrastructure, are poor. Minority populations tend to live in remote regions, so they tend to be worse off. They constantly lose out in the battle for funding and resources against other groups, who have better lobbying power, are better represented in the capitals and have the ear of the governing regimes. Such *de facto* arrangements are much more powerful than the letter of the law, especially since the respect for the latter is limited.

Minorities are such a small proportion of the Armenian population that their presence tends to be overlooked by the authorities, who are preoccupied by economic concerns and policy over Karabakh. The largest minority – the Yezidis – are often excluded from policy-making and opportunities to promote their identity. The Soviet policy of ensuring minority quotas, and guaranteeing participation in public life and educational opportunities, has withered away and no alternative policy has replaced it. This gives grounds to Yezidi concerns: for example, the absence of registration of ethnicity in the new Armenian passports



produced fears of gradual assimilation. The state authorities also avoided tackling the issue of the Kurdish/Georgian dichotomy, that is, whether two distinct communities exist or not. It is hoped that the recent census (October 2001) will clarify the situation, when it is published.

Nor does the Russian minority enjoy much state support; the Russian language is dying out and Russian schools are closing. The Russian government gives little practical support for Russian language and culture in the South Caucasus.

In Georgia, state policies *vis-à-vis* minorities are hard to determine. The Georgian state has not fully expanded into its entire territory. Most of the loosely controlled areas are populated by minorities. As they are remote, underdeveloped and economically unattractive, there is little incentive for the authorities to invest in them or initiate state action. In Azerbaijan, the state firmly holds the reins of power and has a more coherent approach – a variant of the Soviet pattern.

## Constitutional arrangements

The Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan stipulates a unitary state structure, resisting any suggestion of autonomous arrangements for its minorities, and making no provision for the status of Karabakh, if it is re-incorporated. Demands for political or cultural autonomy, made throughout the 1990s by Lezgin groups, therefore have no legal outlet. The heads of local administrations are centrally nominated, while President Aliiev keeps a close eye on personnel appointments in the minority-populated areas. While various committees on nationality affairs exist in the presidential administration and in the Parliament, the most prominent political body dealing with minority problems is the Ministry for State Security.

The Georgian Constitution leaves open the issue of a possible federalization of Georgia, until the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is decided. This creates uncertainty. The idea of federalization is unpopular, since, in the eyes of the Georgian majority, the autonomous status of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Ajara led to their *de facto* separation from the rest of the country. As a result, the claims of the Javakheti Armenians for autonomy are discouraged. Heads of the local administrations are nominated by the authorities in Tbilisi, but local power struggles play a pivotal role in who is listened to in the capital. Local elections, which might have increased local representation, were planned for autumn 2001. They were postponed, allegedly for budgetary reasons, but the turmoil in the ruling establishment in autumn 2001 apparently played a part.

## Language and civil integration

In its minority areas, Georgia has largely left intact the educational provisions inherited from the Soviet era, including primary and secondary education in the minority languages, and there is some support for locally based higher education in minority languages, such as teachers' training colleges. However, the new needs of civil integra-

tion through language have not been adequately addressed. There are no state-organized Georgian-language courses for minorities in their areas of settlement. Those who might be willing to learn Georgian have no opportunity to do so.<sup>84</sup> At present it is hard for minorities to access Georgian laws, since they are published in Georgian and sometimes translated into English. As minorities tend to speak neither, initiatives have been taken by the minority NGOs, with Western financial backing, to translate Georgian laws from English into Russian. However, inaccuracies inevitably occur, leading to confusion. The Parliamentary Committee on Civil Integration intends to translate an essential package of Georgian laws into the main minority languages.<sup>85</sup> The Law on State Language has been drafted. A programme to teach the Georgian language was given the go-ahead by Shevardnadze in early 2001. Similar initiatives launched in the past, however, remained largely declaratory.

The lack of proficiency in the Georgian language among minorities has implications for the civil administration. Exams for civil servants are taken in Georgian, although a grace period has been provided for those in minority areas. Even so, it is unrealistic to expect that many of the members of local administrations could comply with this regulation. Another difficulty is the appointment of judges who speak only Georgian to the minority-populated areas. Trials are conducted via interpreters. Locals complain that this leads to unfair decisions.

As there is no state support for the Russian language, the younger generations tend to speak no language other than their own. If this situation continues, the minorities will be unable to communicate with the rest of the population.

Access to culture and education in Georgia is also restricted by the lack of proficiency in the majority language. Russian-language publications used to provide a space for intercultural exchange, but they have dramatically diminished, being promoted only by rare NGOs, such as Caucasus House, which also teaches other Caucasian languages. Higher education is also in Georgian, and therefore virtually inaccessible for minorities outside the capital. Instead, young people opt to acquire education in their kin states, or go to Russia. There are few ways in which the minority populations can learn about developments in the rest of the country. The lack of proficiency in Georgian precludes people from watching Georgian TV and listening to the radio, and, while a Russian-language Georgian TV station does exist, poor reception and periodic electricity blackouts severely limit its impact. Georgian radio also barely reaches the regions. This contributes to the sense that the minorities' inclusion within the boundaries of the Georgian state is an accident of history.

In Abkhazia, education in the Gali region, on the borders with Georgia proper, remains a sensitive issue. Although Abkhaz is declared the state language in Abkhazia, the population of the region is mostly Georgian and speaks only Georgian, therefore school education has to be in Georgian as well. This does take place, to some extent, since Soviet provisions have partially survived. However, there is a view in Abkhazia that Abkhaz should become the main language. Others argue that the Georgian minority in Abkhazia are entitled to be educated in their own language.

In Azerbaijan, by contrast, minorities have, since Soviet times, enjoyed good proficiency in Azeri. Russian is also more widely used in Baku, and receives state attention. In the provinces, however, the situation is already changing. The issue is how to protect minority languages and culture in the future. The transition to the Latin script, ordered by the President since 1 September 2001, to bring Azeri into line with the Turkish alphabet, has caused alarm among the minorities. The move to the Latin script is also unpopular among the Azeri majority.

## Harassment and public attitudes

There are no officially sponsored policies of harassment of ethnic minorities in Georgia. Amnesty International has reported beatings and torture of ethnic Azeris by police in the Bolnissi region.<sup>86</sup> However, it also reports similar incidents concerning ethnic Georgians, so these developments reflect the general human rights situation in the country, rather than any targeting of minorities *per se*. Political representation, however, is an issue: Armenians have only four and Azeris six MPs in the 235-strong Georgian Parliament, and not all of these MPs understand Georgian, so it is unclear how they participate in the parliamentary work.<sup>87</sup>

More worrying are the public attitudes towards minorities. There is a heated debate over whether to register ethnicity in Georgian documents. The authorities' view is that registration of ethnicity may be divisive. The ethnic Georgian supporters of registration claim that they could quickly lose their distinct identity and be outnumbered by other groups which have higher birth rates.

From the minorities' position, there is little desire to change the *status quo* of autonomy by default. However, neither do they want Tbilisi's policies to detrimentally affect their lives, whether in terms of withdrawing Russian troops from the bases, the visa regime with Russia or attempts to enforce any attributes of the Georgian state. The central authorities are concerned by the absence of any desire to learn the Georgian language, to use Georgian currency or to integrate as citizens of Georgia. The minorities argue that the state neglects the regions; does not pay salaries and pensions; and does not provide schooling, healthcare or the facilities to learn Georgian. In other words, both sides are reluctant to keep their side of the social contract.

In Azerbaijan, the state practices detention and prosecution of real or alleged separatists, such as Talysh and Lezgins who are given long jail sentences for their 'terrorist activities'. Examples are the 1994 bombing of the Baku underground, blamed on Lezgin separatists, and the July 1993 attacks on Russian border guards, organized by an 'Imam of the Lezgin people' and his supporters, who were given sentences of between two and 15 years' imprisonment. During the 1996–7 trial, the defendants admitted going into Azerbaijan to gather support among the Avars, Azeris, Lezgins and other groups, to launch attacks against Russian border troops with the aim of separating Dagestan from the Russian Federation. These incidents were

blamed by the authorities on Sadval, operating underground, with dubious proof.<sup>88</sup>

The inability of Sadval to get publicity in Azerbaijan, its alleged link with Armenian security services and the lack of information on the trial for the 1994 bombing, have resulted in a negative image of Sadval among the general public. Some human rights activists believe that the authorities were right to prosecute alleged Sadval activists.<sup>89</sup> The state suppresses public disturbances, such as in November 2000 in Sheki, where both minority and majority groups became victims of police brutality. On the other hand, many Lezgins live in Baku and occupy senior positions in the civil service, army and Parliament. The Aliev regime ensures that, for the sake of stability, ethnic minorities – and women – are proportionally represented in public positions. The state gives financial and political support to officially sanctioned minority organizations, such as the Samur Lezgin National Centre. In Georgia, by contrast, all senior posts tend to be occupied by ethnic Georgians, and there is a firm perception of ethnic discrimination in personnel appointments, especially in law enforcement agencies.

## International and local initiatives

The South Caucasus has been an arena of active involvement for many international organizations, Western governments and international NGOs determined to direct the transformation of the South Caucasus into free market economies and liberal, fully independent democracies. Although international involvement has been substantial, there were few initiatives specifically targeting minorities. The UN and its organizations concentrated on resolution of the existing conflicts and on development challenges. Still, it has initiated some community development policies in minority areas of Georgia through the UN Volunteers, such as in Javakheti. The IOM and the UNHCR concentrated their efforts on repatriation of Meskhetian Turks in the 1990s, with little success.

The OSCE and the CoE are the two most important organizations vested with the mandate to ensure adherence to international standards in the treatment of minorities. The main CoE international instruments in minority protection are the Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM), both of which entered into force in 1998. The OSCE addresses minority issues through political commitments in the human dimension field, which encompasses human rights, democratic institutions and the rule of law. The office of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities deals with particular issues regarding minorities in the OSCE area, with special emphasis on conflict prevention.

### Council of Europe

The Council of Europe accepted Georgian membership in 1999, when Georgia signed the European

Convention on Human Rights. This did not bring much improvement, however. As Human Rights Watch *World Report 2001* states, 'Georgia's already poor human rights record deteriorated.'<sup>90</sup> Local human rights defenders claim that the situation became worse because, prior to accession, the government was more sensitive to the opinion of the international community. Once CoE membership was achieved, there was little incentive for change. At the same time, local NGOs are also not very active in applying CoE leverage against abuses and barely regard the CoE as a vehicle for change.

The CoE insisted on the adoption of a law on national minorities as one of the conditions of Georgia's membership, alongside the repatriation of the Meskhetian Turks. From the viewpoint of the Parliamentary Committee on Civil Integration, there is no need for such a law, since it is impossible to define who belongs to minorities that are protected.<sup>91</sup> It maintains that the adoption of the special law on minorities would protect only those living in compact settlements, not those living in mixed areas. It argues that implementation of the existing human rights legislation, which addresses minority concerns, is needed.

Both Armenia and Azerbaijan joined the CoE in January 2001. Although both countries have poor human rights records, the government of Azerbaijan has made less progress than that of Armenia. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)'s lengthy list of conditions which the country was required to meet after its accession, including the adoption of a law on ethnic minorities, reflected this situation.<sup>92</sup>

In Armenia local civil society groups are more prepared to join forces with international actors to use CoE membership to put pressure on the authorities.<sup>93</sup>

## OSCE

The OSCE Mission in Georgia was established in November 1992. Currently it is the largest OSCE mission in the Caucasus, with 62 international staff. Its work falls into three domains:<sup>94</sup>

- Prevention of resumption of hostilities in South Ossetia by monitoring the joint peacekeeping operation, assisting in political negotiations and building confidence between the parties to the conflict.
- Promotion of the human dimension in Georgia as a whole. This includes monitoring the minority and human rights situation: for example, the early warning project in Samtskhe-Javakheti.
- Carrying out a border monitoring operation along the Chechen and Ingush sectors of the Russian-Georgian border.

Being constrained by its member-state status, the OSCE Mission generally keeps in line with the Georgian leadership. Since long-term missions are subject to political consent of the host state, they tend to assume a cooperative rather than a campaigning style. This sometimes constrains their ability to take a public stand on issues. Minorities tend to feel that the OSCE is a mouthpiece of

the Georgian government. It is pointed out that the OSCE failed publicly to condemn widespread fraud in presidential and parliamentary elections, and that aid to the state continued regardless.<sup>95</sup> This is not entirely fair to the OSCE: its endorsement of the elections outlined certain concerns, and it applied pressure behind the scenes. However, its inability to take a more decisive public stand undermined its image.

The OSCE offices in Baku and Yerevan are relatively small-scale operations, designed to promote implementation of OSCE principles. Their work includes a review of legislation of the electoral framework, facilitation of contacts and exchanges, raising public awareness of human rights, and promotion of tolerance towards ethnic and religious groups. The Karabakh conflict falls under the remit of the Personal Representative of the Chair-in-Office on the Conflict, dealt with by the OSCE Minsk Group, which serves as a field presence of the latter. Officially headquartered in Tbilisi for reasons of neutrality, it has offices in Yerevan, Baku and Stepanakert. Numerous international NGOs work in partnership with local civil society groups, financed by Western bilateral or multilateral donors.

## Conclusion

The impact of international organizations in raising human rights standards has been more marked in Armenia and, to some extent, Azerbaijan, where the state authorities are sensitive to international opinion, than in Georgia. General progress in the region has not met expectations since independence, and the international organizations have begun to wonder whether their assumptions about Caucasian societies make sense. The recent withdrawal of the International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC) from Georgia – the first case of such an exit from any country – was one reflection of this state of affairs,<sup>96</sup> while the brutal murder of Gunter Beuchel of the EC office in Georgia in December 2001 shocked the international actors involved in the Caucasus.

## Oil and aid

Part from the international organizations, the initial Western interest in the Caucasus was driven by two factors: first, the existence of a powerful Armenian diaspora, and, second, assumptions about Russia's neo-imperial ambitions. USAID has been the largest donor, providing development aid to Armenia totalling some \$1.3 billion between 1992 and 2000. Diaspora sources also provided humanitarian relief, after the December 1988 earthquake in Spitak for example, assistance in economic and infrastructure projects such as building a road from Armenia to Karabakh, and help towards cultural revival. By contrast, US state assistance to Azerbaijan has been restricted by Section 907 (a) of the Freedom Support Act of the US Congress, which prohibits aid to the regimes responsible for blockades of other states. In 2002 the US Congress waived this section as a reward for Azerbaijan's support in the 'war against terrorism'.

Anti-imperial sentiment in the West has been skilfully

exploited by the leaders of Georgia and Azerbaijan. The Caspian Sea energy resources offered them a trump card. The Georgian strategy has been to play on the rivalry between the West and Russia in the Caucasus, presenting itself as a Western ally seeking to break from Russia's control. This paid off: from 1992 to 2001, the US budgeted \$986 million for assistance to Georgia, placing it fourth out of 12 Eurasian countries in terms of US assistance. In addition, over that period the US government sent more than \$334 million in humanitarian aid to Georgia.<sup>97</sup> The EU spends about 30 million euro in budgetary assistance, debt relief and technical assistance annually, joined by other bilateral and multilateral donors.<sup>98</sup> The achievements have been modest. Rather than enabling development, aid has encouraged dependency. Moreover, after 11 September 2001, the situation has changed and Russia has been transformed into a Western ally. Moscow's claim that Georgian negligence has enabled the growth of 'international terrorism' has sounded more credible, and the USA has started to take the situation of sanctuary for fighters and weapons in Pankissi more seriously.

Caspian Sea energy resources also account for the Western interest in the Caucasus. After the demise of the USSR, five littoral states of the Caspian – Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia and Turkmenistan – embarked on various projects to attract investment for exploration and production of oil and gas, and began to compete over the offshore resources. Caspian Sea energy resources are important for the newly independent countries of the area, but are not large in terms of the global context. The Caspian area should be able to deliver about 3 per cent of world supply (overall reserves are estimated at 17 billion barrels, roughly on par with the North Sea reserves). There is a realistic expectation that a further 20 billion barrels can be found. Experts consider Caspian oil strategically important for the EU, mainly for the countries of Southern Europe, rather than for the USA.<sup>99</sup>

Since independence, Caspian energy resource development has been beset with tensions and disagreements, delaying exploitation of the reserves. The three main issues were: the new pipeline routes, the legal division of the Caspian Sea and the business environment.

The main existing and projected pipelines in the South Caspian are:

- Baku (Azerbaijan)–Novorossiisk (Russia). The pipeline is used by the Azerbaijan International Operating Company (AIOC) to pump oil from Azerbaijan. Oil tapping and instability in Chechnya in the mid-1990s prompted Russia to build a by-pass via Dagestan.
- Baku–Supsa (Georgia), an 'early oil' pipeline, used by AIOC, became fully operational in March 1999 and provided the first non-Russian route for Caspian oil.
- Atyrau (Kazakhstan)–Novorossiisk Caspian Pipeline Consortium line, running mainly through Russian territory, has been fully operational since summer 2001.
- Baku–Ceyhan (on the Mediterranean, in Turkey) oil pipeline, designated by governments

of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey and the USA as the Main Export Pipeline in a series of agreements signed in Istanbul in November 1999. The 1,730 km pipeline is to go through Georgian territory. This route is backed by the USA. Russia opposed it throughout the 1990s, but withdrew its opposition in 2001.

Second, there is the issue of the legal division of the Caspian Sea; this could keep disputed fields off-limits indefinitely. The five states have been unable to find a mutually acceptable solution.

Third, although the business environment has improved, unacceptable risk factors remain. Moreover, there are serious deficiencies in Caspian infrastructure, which requires massive cash injections. So far, problems have persisted in attracting financing from conventional sources, such as private banks. Some of the political risks may be mitigated by funds being made available through the World Bank.

The international NGOs in the South Caucasus mainly focused on resolution of conflicts, but some engaged with minority issues. To name just a few, the Forced Migration Projects initiated by the Open Society Institute engaged with the issue of repatriation of the Meskhetian Turks; International Alert sent a fact-finding mission to assess the situation of the Lezgin community in Azerbaijan and runs the 'Georgia's Regions' project, targeting Samtskhe-Javakheti, among others; and the Forum on Early Warning and Early Response (FEWER) produces early warning reports on the region. Local actors are also involved in minority-related work, such as Multi-ethnic Georgia (*Mnogonatsional'naya Gruzia*), an NGO in Tbilisi or the Young Lawyers' Association which has branches in most regions of Georgia, seeking to promote the rule of law and enhance citizens' participation. Caucasus House (Tbilisi) works towards the promotion of multilingual education and supports minority-languages publications through an extensive publishing programme.

Some Georgian NGOs took an active stand against a wave of nationalism in Georgia in 1999 which arose around the issue of the registration of ethnicity in the new Georgian passports. The draft Law on Civil Acts proposed dropping the registration of ethnicity from the new passports (it had been stated in Soviet passports) leaving only nationality, meant as citizenship (Georgian for all citizens of Georgia). However, this suggestion caused protests. Opponents of the draft law claimed that the new provisions would lead to the assimilation of Georgians, because of the low birthrate of this ethnic group, and insisted on keeping registration of ethnicity. NGOs formed a coalition to take a public position against opponents of the law, and launched a public campaign. Discussions became so heated that President Shevardnadze had to intervene. The final decision has been postponed, and the law has not come into force: ethnicity is registered on birth certificates, but not on other identity documents.

In Azerbaijan, the Center of Human Rights of Azerbaijan keeps a watching brief on the Lezgin situation and publishes the electronic *Lezgin News*. The Institute of Peace and Democracy (Baku) carries out research on minority issues in Azerbaijan.<sup>100</sup>

# Conclusion

Having lost the overarching protection of the Soviet central government and found themselves face to face with majorities, minorities have been the net losers in the changes of the independence period. They also somehow 'fell through' the attention of the international community, as the governments in Georgia and Azerbaijan did not welcome external engagement out of fear of fostering ethnic demands. At the same time, after the earlier turmoil, the governments of the region performed a balancing act as a result of which inter-ethnic tensions did not lead to new confrontations. In Georgia, the state has so far failed to conceive of policies aimed at supporting diversity, while being too weak to pursue a coherent assimilatory or centralizing approach, and some minorities managed to achieve *de facto* self-rule. The future, however, is uncertain, depending much on succession and new leaderships to come.

As far as the unresolved conflicts are concerned, there is no discernible desire on the Abkhaz, Ossetian or Karabakh side to enter a common state with Georgia or Azerbaijan. It is difficult to convince their leadership and populations that anything might be gained by this, given the economic and social turmoil in Georgia, and regional poverty in Azerbaijan. The common perception is that, if incorporated back into their original states, the separatists would have much to lose: their security and their dominant political position. Moreover, neither the Georgian nor the Azeri army is likely to be in a position to pose a credible military threat in the immediate future.

While Georgia and Azerbaijan seem unlikely to reconcile themselves to the loss of these territories, they are unable to re-incorporate them by peaceful or military means. It is likely the *status quo* will continue, but this carries its own dangers. First, ongoing small-scale violence in the border zones may escalate into serious fighting. Second, future struggles for political succession in Georgia and in Azerbaijan may bring unresolved conflicts back into focus to be exploited by the politically ambitious.

The likelihood of further upheavals is a matter of conjecture. On the one hand, popular moods in the South Caucasus have drifted towards social apathy, as economic and social life took a sharp downturn and new arrangements took shape in response to the enveloping chaos. The law and order vacuum contributed to a sense of personal insecurity, which pushed aside wider political concerns. Popular passivity has settled in.

On the other hand, social tensions and incidents of protest are growing. The outbreak of violence in northern Azerbaijan and the mutiny by detachments of the Georgian army in May 2001 over social and economic deprivation, may be warning signals that future conflicts may unfold over social rather than ethnic issues.

# Recommendations

1. The governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia should provide for and facilitate the effective participation rights of minorities in political, social and economic life, in keeping with international norms. Systems of government and administration should be set up that allow minorities and women to participate in decision-making and implementation. Legislative procedures should allow representatives of minorities and minority representative institutions, a special role – such as initiation, prior consultation and special voting rights – regarding any bill with a bearing on minority rights.
2. It would be useful to commission an assessment of the effectiveness of Western aid in the South Caucasus and share the principal findings with the leading NGO activists. Such an initiative would be welcome to local civil society. Government agencies, donors and NGOs that fund initiatives in social service provision at various levels should ensure that minority issues are incorporated within the project management cycle, including monitoring and evaluation to ensure sustainability. They should give full support to all groups and peoples, including women, the elderly, the disabled and children within those groups.
3. Local and international actors should work on the promotion of a culture of tolerance and mutual respect. More state effort is needed to discourage the expression of ultra-nationalism and to ensure positive attitudes. NGOs should engage with the wider public on minority issues. The governments should develop inclusive and intercultural educational provisions, and curricula that are culturally and linguistically appropriate, to ensure that all groups have an understanding of their multicultural society, and that there are shared and common values in the public domain which evolve through democratic consultation.
4. The recognition of social and cultural differences should be viewed as an asset and not a deficit. Institutional networks aiming to promote and develop the minority peoples' cultural heritage should be supported and developed. All actions supported by donors and inter-governmental organizations should be required to demonstrate that these actions will not negatively affect cultural and linguistic diversity. The governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia should adopt measures to maintain and promote linguistic and cultural diversity. The international community should support governments in the region in the development of independent institutions, such as an ombudsman on minorities, capable of addressing specific cases, and support dialogue and consultation mechanisms.
5. Georgian-Armenian relations are deteriorating severely. Measures are urgently needed to diffuse the escalating tensions and facilitate a problem-solving approach.
6. Little reliable expertise on the issue of radical Islam in the Caucasus exists, while speculation is rampant. It would be helpful to promote studies seeking to reveal a more accurate picture which would dispel harmful stereotypes. Islamophobia needs to be challenged at all levels within schools and the media.
7. As the repatriation of the Meskhetians to Georgia appears an unlikely prospect, it may be more appropriate to concentrate international efforts to ensure their well-being in the states where they currently live.
8. The importance of confidence-building measures between the Azeri and Armenian political communities should be emphasized. In particular, it would be worth addressing the content of future political arrangements in a more detailed manner. It may be time for more transparent discussion with the wider public.
9. MRG welcomes the accession of the governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to a number of important international human rights and humanitarian instruments, and the incorporation of such standards into their Constitutions. MRG urges these governments to take immediate steps to implement these national and international human rights standards. In particular, government and security forces and non-state actors should be made accountable for violations of such standards. The governments must also take steps to implement the UN Declaration on Minorities, 1992. The international community should equally monitor the implementation of and ensure compliance with international standards by all states.

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