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**ARMENIAN-GEORGIAN RELATIONS IN THE
POST-SOVIET ERA: CHALLENGES AND
OPPORTUNITIES**

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Abstract: As two South Caucasian neighboring countries, Armenia and Georgia share cultural and religious proximity, but there are several contradictions between them caused by both external and internal factors. This study attempts to shed light on the existing controversies and unresolved issues between Armenia and Georgia that pose a challenge for the former. Historical tensions and their direct consequences, diverging foreign policy priorities, problems regarding the Armenian community in Georgia, issues related to cultural heritage, as well as difficulties in transportation via Georgia are discussed.

Keywords: *Armenian-Georgian relations; South Caucasus; Russia; Javakhk; Transit Transportation*

Introduction

Armenians and Georgians have been living side by side in the South Caucasus for centuries and have cultural and religious similarities. Despite their proximity, the two states have chosen different paths in building their foreign policy priorities in the post-Soviet period. Armenia is a strategic ally of the Russian Federation and maintains a membership in several Russia-led organizations, whereas Georgia has been pursuing integration into Western institutions and has stable economic cooperation with Turkey and Azerbaijan. In the context of the geopolitical tensions between Russia and the West, Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as Armenia and Turkey, Armenian-Georgian bilateral relations are in a tenuous position. Additionally, Armenia and Georgia have been at odds regarding the ownership of several territories during their history that has shaped the current relationship.

Today, Georgia is of vital importance to Armenia as it is the main transport and communication corridor to the outside world. Furthermore, a sizeable Armenian community lives in Georgia. The preservation and protection of the rights of Georgia's Armenian community is also a

matter of consideration while endeavoring to develop relations with Georgia. Hence, revealing and discussing the existing problems of the two countries is an essential step towards improving the relationship.

This study consists of three main parts. The first one sheds light mainly on the academic literature explaining the most relevant problems between Armenia and Georgia. In the second and third parts, an attempt is made to cover the gaps of present in the discussed literature primarily concerning recent developments with the help of secondary and primary data, respectively.

The academic literature reveals a range of problematic issues in Armenian-Georgian relations. Some are discussed in this section. First and foremost, the short dispute that occurred at the beginning of the last century and left its mark on the future relations of the two countries are treated. Second, the differing foreign policy preferences of Armenia and Georgia that may directly affect the relationship between the two countries are examined. Next, the most urgent problems of the Armenian community in Georgia are addressed. Finally, the difficulties of transportation-related issues are reviewed.

The Problem of Lori and Javakhk, and Border Demarcation

The 1918 Armenian-Georgian war over Borchalu (Lori) and Akhalkalaki (Javakhk) which are geographically part of the Armenian Highland has left its trace on the present relationship of the two countries. Back in the 19th century, as a part of the Caucasus Viceroyalty, which was an administrative and political region in the Russian Empire, the territories of Armenia and Georgia became subject to territorial-administrative division without taking into consideration the ethnic distribution there. Only in 1917, when the Russian Empire was abolished, did the three South Caucasian nations (Armenians, Georgians, and Tatars) independently agree to solve this problem based on the ethnic principle. The Georgian National Council initially did not oppose the transfer of two-thirds of the territory of Borchalu and the entire province of Akhalkalaki to Armenia, which were both mostly inhabited by ethnic Armenians. However, in order to prevent the advancement of Turkish forces toward Tbilisi, the Georgian army entered Lori and established a checkpoint there.¹ Afterward, the newly formed Georgian government

¹ Arshak Jamalyan, *Hay-VratsakanKnchiry [The Armenian-Georgian Wrinkle]* (Yerevan, Mitq Analytical Center, 1991), 16-25.

started to openly express its pretensions not only to Lori, but also to Akhalkalaki, and refused to take its army out. Under those circumstances, in December 1918, Armenian forces entered Lori and Borchalu.² Hovannisian (1971) asserts that after ten days of violent clashes, a British-brokered ceasefire was reached between the parties that urged the cessation of military actions, but it did not end the hostilities. A provisional agreement signed in January 1919 proclaimed Borchalu (Lori) a “neutral zone” under British supervision. The northern and southern parts of Lori were given to Georgia and Armenia, respectively, and mixed governance was established in the central region. Armenia was forced to return Akhalkalaki to Georgia.

The 1918 war generated the problem of the Armenian-Georgian border demarcation³. Samkharadze (2012) states that the January 1919 agreement provided a final resolution of the conflict and delimitation of the border at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. However, the Paris Conference did not resolve this issue. After the establishment of Soviet rule in Georgia and the resistance carried out by the Armenian population of Lori, it was reunited with the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR).⁴ The border issue between the Georgian and Armenian SSRs again remained unresolved and became a source of tension during the Soviet period. Up until now, the border has not been fully demarcated and delineated.⁵ From time to time, the uncertainty becomes the cause of unpleasant, albeit minor incidents.

Diverging Foreign Policy Vectors

The South Caucasus has historically been subjected to Russian political, economic, and military domination. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian position was remarkably undermined and the United States along with European Union started to pursue the aim of filling the void of influence in the region by expressing their interest in the vast energy resources of the South Caucasus. Except for Armenia,

² Eric Lee, *The Experiment: Georgia's Forgotten Revolution 1918-1921* (London, Zed Books Ltd, The Foundry, 2017).

³ Richard G. Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia* (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1971).

⁴ Nika Samkharadze, “Georgian State Border – Past and Present”, *Center for Social Science (CSS)*, (2012), 9-12, http://css.ge/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/nika_border_eng.pdf.

⁵ Artyom Tonoyan, “Rising Armenian-Georgia Tensions and the Possibility of a New Ethnic Conflict in the South Caucasus”, *Demokratizatsiya* 18, no. 4 (2010): 301-302.

Russian influence recorded a steady decline in the two other South Caucasian countries, Georgia and Azerbaijan. The current urgency of the growing confrontation between Russia and the West and the possibility of another “Cold War” threatens to exacerbate already existing divisions in the South Caucasus.⁶ Hence, regional geopolitics has become a complicated issue in the region.

Since their independence, both Armenia and Georgia have been trying to conduct pragmatic foreign policies. From this perspective, the priorities of the two countries differ notably.⁷ Today, Russia is considered to be Armenia’s primary “strategic partner”⁸ and the most important ally.⁹ Conversely, Georgian-Russian relations can hardly be described as strategically important or friendly. Georgia has adopted a pro-Western stance since independence.¹⁰

According to Asanishvili, a reasonable explanation for these diverging foreign policies lies in so-called “collective memory.”¹¹ “In recent history, Armenians have viewed Russia as a protector from Muslim invasions. Meanwhile, Georgians considered Russia an invader that “annexed” their territory. This environment of mistrust and hatred was present even during the 70 years of Soviet rule in Georgia. A “turning point” of the Communist period was the 1989 tragedy also known as Tbilisi massacre or Tbilisi tragedy when the Soviet army violently oppressed an anti-Soviet protest in Georgian capital leaving 21 people dead and many others injured. This event exacerbated existing animosity of Georgians toward Russia and deepened the divide between them.”¹²

⁶ *The Perceptions about Armenia’s and Georgia’s Policy Towards Each Other Among Two States’ Youth. Myths And Reality.* (Yerevan, Political Science Association of Armenia, 2015), 9, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/georgien/12746.pdf>.

⁷ Pikria Asanishvili, “Main Security Challenges in the South Caucasus Region: perceptions of Two Countries” in *Armenian – Georgian Relations: Challenges and Opportunities for the Bilateral Cooperation* (Yerevan, Political Science Association of Armenia, 2014), 51-70.

⁸ “National Security Strategy of Armenia”, 2007, <https://www.mfa.am/filemanager/Statics/Doctrineeng.pdf>.

⁹ Revaz Gachechiladze, “Geopolitics in the South Caucasus: Local and External Players”, *Geopolitics* 7, no. 1 (2010): 122

¹⁰ Tracey German, “Good neighbors or distant relatives?” Regional identity and cooperation in the South Caucasus”, *Central Asian Survey* 3, no. 2 (2012): 143.

¹¹ Asanishvili, “Main Security Challenges”, 51-70.

¹² Pavel K. Baev, Civil Wars in Georgia: Corruption Breeds Violence, in *Potentials of Disorder*, (Manchester, 2003), 127–144.

Chumbadze (2014) explains the pro-Western direction of Georgia favored by all post-independence Georgian governments and by the overwhelming majority of the population with three facts. First, Georgians have always seen Europe as a source of “sustainable and democratic state development” and the basis for the “stability and invulnerability” of a multiethnic country like Georgia. Second, the Euro-Atlantic bloc is regarded as “the only safety guarantee” politically, economically, and militarily. Finally, Georgians have considered themselves Europeans, and integration with the West is a return after a long separation¹³.

Another critical moment in Russian-Georgian relations was the 2008 Russo-Georgian War that significantly shaped the geopolitics in the South Caucasus. Mikheil Saakashvili’s eagerness to accelerate Georgia’s inclusion into Western institutions became a problem for Russia due to the possibility of the enlargement of NATO.¹⁴ Besides, Russian presence in the two secessionist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia created additional tension in the relations of the two countries that culminated in the Russo-Georgian War. After the war, Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹⁵ During the war and later on, the Armenian government under the presidency of Serzh Sargsyan did not openly favor any of the parties, although the country suffered significant economic damages from the war amounting to more than \$670 million¹⁶ as most of Armenia’s transit routes pass through Georgia.

In the same context, another source of tension in Armenian-Georgian relations is the presence of the Russian 102nd military base in Gyumri, Armenia.¹⁷ Hamilton argues that the five thousand troops

¹³ Ketevan Chumbadze, “Foreign Policy Dimension of the Georgian-Armenian Bilateral Agenda: Challenges and Opportunities for the Future Cooperation” in *Armenian – Georgian Relations: Challenges and Opportunities for the Bilateral Cooperation*, (Yerevan, Political Science Association of Armenia 2014), 71-85.

¹⁴ Cory Welt, “Georgia: Background and U.S. Policy”, *Congressional Research Service* (2019), 13, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45307.pdf>.

¹⁵ Mitat Çelikpala, “Not a Single Step Ahead: Turkey and the South Caucasus in 2009” in *Identities, Ideologies and Institutions: 2001-2011 A Decade of Insight Into the Caucasus* (Yerevan: Caucasus Institute, 2011), 194-211.

¹⁶ Nona Mikhelidze, “After the 2008 Russia-Georgia War: Implications for the Wider Caucasus. The International Spectator”, *Italian Journal of International Affairs* 44, no. 3 (2009): 27-42.

¹⁷ Sergey Minasyan, “New Challenges and Opportunities for Armenia and Georgia in the Context of Regional Security” in *Armenia and Georgia in the Context of Current Political*

deployed in the 102nd Russian military base enhance Moscow's military presence in the South Caucasus and pose an immediate danger to Georgia.¹⁸

In contrast to Saakashvili's administration, the incumbent Georgian Dream coalition government has adopted a somewhat "balanced policy" in their relations with Russia¹⁹ since coming to power in 2012, eliminating the possibility of the exacerbation of tensions between Armenia and Georgia on geopolitical grounds. However, a pro-Russian shift in Georgia's foreign policy is not likely to occur as the latter is still pursuing its pro-Western policy.²⁰ Welt states that the current Georgian government has sought to restore relations mainly in the economic sphere and has been quite successful (Georgian merchandise exports rose from 2% in 2012 to 13% in 2018).²¹ In 2013, Russia lifted the embargo on Georgian exports that had been implemented in 2006. At the same time, economic reconciliation has not provided a platform for the settlement of the political problems between Russia and Georgia due to Abkhazia and South Ossetia.²² Georgia has been left in a "legal deadlock" as it cannot re-establish diplomatic relations with Russia unless the latter agrees to discuss the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity.²³

Another area of contention between Georgia and Russia is the former's determination to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic community.²⁴ The NSC clearly states that "one of Georgia's major foreign and security policy priorities is membership in NATO and the European Union".²⁵ In

Developments. New Challenges and Opportunities in the Realm of Regional Security, (Tbilisi-Yerevan: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2015), 4-10.

¹⁸ Robert E. Hamilton, *August 2008 and Everything After: A Ten-Year Retrospective on the Russia-Georgia War*, Foreign Policy Research Institute (2018), 15. <https://www.fpri.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/final-bssp-1-hamilton.pdf>

¹⁹ Paata Gaprindashvili, *The Future of Russia-Georgia relations: The need for comprehensive anti-annexation policy*, Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (2018), 29, https://grass.org.ge/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Georgian-and-Russian-Experts-Searching-for-Ways-of-Normalization_Eng.pdf.

²⁰ Minasyan, "New Challenges", 6.

²¹ Welt, "Georgia", 13.

²² Gaprindashvili, *The Future*, 29; Welt, "Georgia", 13.

²³ Hamilton, *August 2008*, 15.

²⁴ Hayk S. Kotanjyan, HH yev Vrastani Anvtangayin Razmavarakan Shaheri Hamadrman Problemi Eutyán Masin [About the Essence of the Problem in Coinciding Security Interests of Armenia and Georgia] in *Razmavarakan Anvtangayin Hetazotutyunner*. Yerevan, HH Pashtpanutyan Nakhararutyan D. Kanayani Anvan Azgayin Razmavarakan Hetazotutyunneri Institut (2008), 453-460.

²⁵ "National Security Concept of Georgia", <https://mod.gov.ge/uploads/2018/pdf/NSC-ENG.pdf>.

1994, Georgia joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, followed by the 2008 Bucharest Summit where the allies agreed on Georgia's NATO membership provided it meet all the necessary requirements. NATO fully supports "territorial integrity and sovereignty within its internationally recognized borders, and calls on Russia to reverse its recognition of the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as an independent state." Furthermore, in 2014, NATO launched a package of specific steps to help Georgia defend itself and prepare for membership.²⁶ In its turn, Georgia is the fifth top contributor to NATO-led missions.²⁷ Some authors argue that its traditional anti-Russian orientation determines Georgia's willingness to obtain NATO membership, as it sees a potential threat to its territorial integrity from Russia.²⁸ Hovhannisyan states that Georgia's membership in NATO may create an additional dividing line in the South Caucasus, which is not in Armenia's interests.²⁹

Armenian and Georgian interests also diverge in the field of regional security. While Georgia pursues NATO membership, Armenia is the only regional member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and views its participation as "a component of its security," as stated in its NSS.³⁰ Meanwhile, Armenia also seeks cooperation with NATO, again stated in the former's NSS. However, in contrast to Georgia, Armenia's official goal is not gaining membership in NATO but actively participating in the framework of the PfP program. Armenia is also a member of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council and an active contributor to the NATO-led operations in Afghanistan and Kosovo.³¹

Apart from its participation in CSTO, Armenia is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In 2013, Serzh Sargsyan officially announced

²⁶ "Relations with Georgia", NATO, Last updated: 26 Mar. 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_38988.htm.

²⁷ Welt, "Georgia", 11.

²⁸ Tornike Sharashenidze, "NATO as Viewed from Moscow and Tbilisi" in *Georgian and Russian Experts Searching for Ways of Normalization*, (Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2018), 38.

²⁹ Nikolay Hovhannisyan, "NATO-in Vrastani Andamaksutyun Hartsy Hayastani Azgayin Anvtangutyun Tesankyunits [The Question of Georgia's Membership in NATO from the Perspective of Armenia's National Security]" in *Razmavarakan Anvtangayin Hetazotutyunner*. Yerevan, HH Pashtpanutyun Nakhharutyun D. Kanayani Anvan Azgayin Razmavarakan Hetazotutyunneri Institut (2008), 515-525.

³⁰ "National Security Strategy of Armenia", 2007, <https://www.mfa.am/filemanager/Statics/Doctrineeng.pdf>.

³¹ "Relations with Armenia", NATO, Last updated: 08 Nov. 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_48893.htm.

Armenia's willingness to join the Customs Union (CU) instead of signing the Association Agreement (AA) with the European Union (EU).³² Sargsyan's decision was probably forced by Armenia's dependency on Russia both politically (Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Turkish blockade, and marginalization from regional projects) and economically (Russia's presence in the economic and energy sectors, the oligarchy, monopolies).³³ Armenia officially became an EAEU member on January 2, 2015.³⁴ On the contrary, Georgia has been steadily moving toward integration into the EU. It signed the AA with EU in June 2014, which was later ratified by the Georgian and European Parliaments, as well as all the EU member states. The AA, which also included the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) covering the economic aspects of the partnership, fully came into force in July 2016.³⁵

As stated above, Armenia is also a member of another Russia-led post-Soviet organization, CIS, whereas Georgia withdrew from it in 2008 as a result of the Russo-Georgian war.³⁶ Some authors claim that several post-Soviet countries that have been following a Western path for their development (i.e. Georgia) are participating in opposing organizations, such as GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova).³⁷

Finally, the most challenging difference in the foreign policy of Armenia and Georgia are in their relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan. Armenia's attitude toward Turkey has historically been shaped through the prism of Armenian Genocide and Turkey's refusal to recognize it.³⁸ Since April 1993, Armenian-Turkish 300 kilometers-long border has

³² Richard R. Giragosian, "Armenia's Strategic U-Turn". *European Council on Foreign Relations*, London, (2014), 1,

https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/179381/ECFR99_ARMENIA_MEMO_AW.pdf.

³³ Vahram Ter-Matevosyan, Anna Drnoian, et al. "Armenia in the Eurasian Economic Union: reasons for joining and its consequences", *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 58, no. 3 (2017): 341.

³⁴ "International Organisations: Eurasian Economic Union", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, <https://www.mfa.am/en/international-organisations/6>.

³⁵ "EU-Georgia Association Agreement", European Union, Accessed: 13 Sep. 2016, https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia_en/9740/EU/Georgia%20Association%20Agreement.

³⁶ "International Organisations: Commonwealth of Independent States", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, <https://www.mfa.am/en/international-organisations/2>.

³⁷ Konstantin Kurilev, K., et al. "A Quantitative Analysis of Geopolitical Pluralism in the Post-Soviet Space". *International Organisations Research Journal* 13, no 1 (2018): 134-135.

³⁸ Aleksandr Iskandaryan, "Armenia-Turkey: Divided by History, United by Geography" in *Identities, Ideologies and Institutions: 2001-2011 A Decade of Insight Into the Caucasus*, (Yerevan: Caucasus Institute, 2011): 180.

been officially closed by Turkey as a result of the ongoing conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh at the time.³⁹ Referring to Armenian-Azerbaijani relations, Mustafayeva (2018) asserts that even though the active phase of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict ended in 1994, ceasefire violations are common along the line of contact. The unresolved conflict further escalated in April 2016 (known as “Four-day War”), when both sides suffered hundreds of losses. Due to its complicated relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan, Armenia regards Georgia’s developing cooperation with these two hostile countries as a serious concern.⁴⁰ Minasyan asserts that in its NSC, Georgia defines relations with Azerbaijan as a “strategic partnership” and Turkey as a “leading partner in the region” that is of strategic importance for Georgia both from a socio-economic and military standpoint, while Armenia is not defined in any of those ways.⁴¹

For Armenia, the most burdensome aspect of Georgia-Turkey-Azerbaijan trilateral cooperation is the intention of Turkey and Azerbaijan to isolate it from all regional projects (i.e. Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Supsa oil pipelines, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzrum gas pipeline, Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad).⁴² Chumbadze asserts that the enhancement of this trilateral cooperation will increase Georgia’s economic dependence on Turkey and Azerbaijan by expanding Azerbaijani-Turkish influence through investments and funds in various regional projects.⁴³ Ter-Matevosyan argues that besides economic expansion, Turkey seeks to expand its religious, educational, cultural, as well as humanitarian influence in Georgia by establishing corresponding institutions.⁴⁴

Problems of the Armenian Community in Georgia

Another sensitive topic in the bilateral relations of the two countries is the situation of the Armenians living in Georgia. There has

³⁹ Sergey Markedonov, “Russia and the conflicts in the South Caucasus: main approaches, problems, and prospects,” *Journal of Conflict Transformation* 3, no. 2 (2018): 39.

⁴⁰ Najiba Mustafayeva, “The Danger of No Peace, No War in Nagorno-Karabakh,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (2018): 121.

⁴¹ Minasyan, “New Challenges”, 9.

⁴² Zaur Shiriyev, *Institutionalizing a Trilateral Strategic Partnership: Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey*. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (2016), 4, https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=cd257d1b-df92-5184-9ad4-2a5dd95c0886&groupId=252038.

⁴³ Chumbadze, “Foreign Policy Dimensions”, 71-85.

⁴⁴ Vahram Ter-Matevosyan, (2017). “Turkish Soft Power Politics in Georgia: Making Sense of Political and Cultural Implications” in *Religion and Soft Power in the South Caucasus*, Routledge (2017): 35-55, file:///C:/Users/ADStudent/Downloads/Memo.pdf.

been an Armenian community in Georgia since ancient times, the most considerable portion of which lives in Javakhk. Sabanadze describes the Samtskhe-Javakheti region as “a potential zone of conflict,” referring to the existing problems in terms of protection of minority rights and “power-sharing” structures.⁴⁵ In their attempt to create a mono-ethnic state, the Georgian government has opted for an isolationist policy toward the Armenian-populated Samtskhe-Javakheti region.

Javakhk Armenians are also constantly facing the need for reforms in the sphere of education and the establishment of corresponding institutions.⁴⁶ There is a problem of the so-called “Georgianisation” of Armenian schools. Specifically, courses of the Armenian History and Geography have been eliminated from the school curriculum, and the time devoted to teaching the Armenian language has been reduced. Children in Armenian schools in and out of Javakhk learn their native language only during Armenian Language and Literature courses. All the other subjects, including Armenian History, are taught in Georgian.⁴⁷ Moreover, those teaching Georgian in Armenian schools are paid two times more than those teaching other subjects.⁴⁸

Due to their weak integration into Georgian society, there is a tendency on the part of Javakhk Armenians to enroll their children in schools where the primary teaching language is either Armenian or Russian, instead of placing them in Georgian schools.⁴⁹ As a result, the vast majority of Javakhk Armenians do not properly speak or understand

⁴⁵ Natalie Sabanadze, *Armenian Minority in Georgia: Defusing Interethnic Tension*, *European Centre for Minority Issues* (2001), Flensburg, Germany, https://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/redakteure/publications/pdf/brief_6.pdf.

⁴⁶ Pavel Chobanyan, “Vrastani Nkatmamb HH Anvtangayin Qaghaqakanutyany Mshakman Razmavarakan Koghmnoroshichneri Shurj [About the Cultivation of Armenia’s Security Policy Strategic Determinants toward Georgia]” in *Razmavarakan Anvtangayin Hetazotutyunner*, Yerevan, HH Pashtpanutyany Nakhararutyany D. Kanayani Anvan Azgayin Razmavarakan Hetazotutyunneri Institut, (2008), 481-514.

⁴⁷ Roman Karapetyan, “Hay-Vratsakan Hamaynqy yev Nranum Arka Khndirneri Artsartsumnery Hay-Vratsakan Mijpetakan Haraberutyunnerum [The Armenian-Georgian Community and Raising of Existing Problems in Armenian-Georgian Interstate Relations]”. *Orenqy ev Irakanutyun* 1, 40, <http://ysu.am/files/%20%D5%B0%D5%A1%D5%B5%20%D5%B0%D5%A1%D5%B4%D5%A1%D5%B5%D5%B6%D6%84%D5%A8.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Levon Mkrtchyan, “Krtutyany ev Gitutyany Khndirneri Hay-Vratsakan Pokhharaberutyunnerum [The problems of Education and Science in Armenian-Georgian Relations]” in *Razmavarakan Anvtangayin Hetazotutyunner*. Yerevan, HH Pashtpanutyany Nakhararutyany D. Kanayani Anvan Azgayin Razmavarakan Hetazotutyunneri Institut (2008), 566-572.

⁴⁹ Tonoyan, “Rising Armenian-Georgia Tensions”, 296.

Georgian. The language barrier creates additional difficulties while trying to pursue higher education and find an appropriate job in Georgia. The high unemployment rate causes continuous demographic change in Javakhk. While trying to make a living, many Javakhk Armenians have to leave their homes mostly for Russia.⁵⁰

Georgian authorities have recently been attempting to deprive the communal regions of Georgia of several aspects of independence, and Samtskhe-Javakheti is among them. For instance, the local self-governing bodies have been separated from the executive ones. Since then the latter has been appointed by Presidential Decree. Karapetyan states that the appointed officials are usually local Armenians but are chosen when they seem more accepting of the government's policies concerning Javakheti. As a result, the demands on behalf of the Armenian minority of Javakhk are not fully delivered to the authorities, and many issues remain unresolved.⁵¹ Regarding representation in the Georgian Parliament, the Armenian minority gained three seats during the 2016 elections, which Tonoyan calls "symbolic" and "limited".⁵²

The Georgian government is concerned with "irredentist claims" heard from Javakhk Armenians based on its fears with the precedent of Nagorno Karabakh, although those are nothing more than "grassroots level" statements.⁵³ There have been several attempts by specific groups or individuals from the local Armenian population to speak up for their rights, especially in the early 1990s and mid-2000s. However, those attempts gradually faded away when the Georgian government quickly managed to co-opt the leaders.⁵⁴ In their turn, Armenian authorities have made every possible effort to not inflame separatist sentiments in Javakhk and have never encouraged those aspirations. Armenia has always cared about maintaining normal relations with its northern neighbor, since Georgia is the only transit route for Armenia to Western markets and the deterioration of relations between the two countries may negatively affect the Armenian economy.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Jonathan Wheatley, "Obstacles Impeding the Regional Integration of the Javakheti Region of Georgia", *European Centre for Minority Issues* (2004), 10, https://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/redakteure/publications/pdf/working_paper_22.pdf.

⁵¹ Karapetyan, "Hay-Vratsakan Hamaynqy", 40-42.

⁵² Tonoyan "Rising Armenian-Georgia Tensions", 296.

⁵³ Gachechiladze, "Geopolitics in the South Caucasus", 122.

⁵⁴ Vahram Ter-Matevosyan & Brent Currie, "A conflict that did not happen: revisiting the Javakhk affair in Georgia", *Nations and Nationalism* 25, no. 1 (2018): 15.

⁵⁵ Asanishvili, "Main Security Challenges", 51-70.

The academic literature lacks sources that address the problems of the Armenians of Tbilisi. Only Mkrtchyan (2009) emphasizes that the number of Armenians in Tbilisi has significantly decreased, and they are no longer the biggest ethnic minority there. She identifies several issues related to Tbilisi's Armenian community: the "isolation" and lack of organizational coordination in the communal life; "loss of traces of the Armenian impact on Tbilisi" that, basically, refers to the problem of preservation of the Armenian history of Tbilisi (buildings, documents, private archives); and the situation of Armenian schools which are gradually becoming less popular among the Armenians.⁵⁶

The Problem of Cultural Heritage

The Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Georgia was established in the 5th century AD but gained legal status only in 2012. It has always played an important role in the religious and cultural life of the Armenian community.⁵⁷ But there is a significant contention between the Armenian Apostolic and Georgian Orthodox churches concerning the ownership of seven disputable churches (one in Akhaltsikhe and six others in Tbilisi).⁵⁸ Several Armenian churches in Georgia do not belong to the Armenian community anymore and are owned by the Georgian authorities.⁵⁹ The Armenian Diocese demands the return of these six churches, two of which (Norashen and St. Nshan) the Georgian Orthodox Church intends to appropriate.⁶⁰ In its turn, the Georgian Orthodox Church demands five other churches (Khuchap, Hnevanq, Kobair, Akhtala, and Kirants) located in the territory of Armenia, near the Georgian border. The Armenian side denies these claims emphasizing the Armenian origins of those churches.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Mkrtchyan, "Krtutyany ew Gitutyany xndirnery", 566-572.

⁵⁷ "Diocese of Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Holy Church in Georgia", <https://armenianchurch.ge/hy/component/content/article/654-the-diocese-of-the-armenian-apostolic-church-in-georgia>.

⁵⁸ Tatul Hakobyan, "Vicheli Yekeghetsiner: Khuchap, Hnevanq, Qobair, Akhtala, Kirants [The Disputable Churches: Khuchap, Hnevanq, Qobair, Akhtala, Kirants]". *Civilnet*, August 28, 2017, www.civilnet.am/news/2017/08/28/Վիճելի-եկեղեցիներ-Խուճապ-Հնեվանք-Քոբայր-Ախտալա-Կիրանց/320349 (accessed October 5, 2019).

⁵⁹ Karapetyan, "Hay-Vratsakan Hamaynqy", 40.

⁶⁰ Vazgen Mirzakhanyan Right Rev. Bishop et al. "Hay-Araqelakan Surb Yekeghetsu Virahayots Temy [The Diocese of Armenian Church in Georgia]" in *Razmavarakan Anvtangayin Hetazotutyunner*. Yerevan, HH Pashtpanutyany Nakhararutyany D. Kanayani Anvan Azgayin Razmavarakan Hetazotutyunneri Institut (2008), 573-580.

⁶¹ Hakobyan, "Vicheli Yekeghetsiner".

Additionally, in the past few decades, the Georgian Church and the government have adopted a policy of the complete “abolition” or “Georgianisation” of cultural monuments (churches, cemeteries, khachkars, tombstones, lapidary inscriptions) of Armenian origin. One of those is the famous Khojivanq cemetery in Tbilisi which was destroyed during Stalin’s time and where many remarkable Armenian public figures were buried. Later, in the early 2000s, the cemetery was recovered thanks to the efforts of the “Teryan” cultural center. However, there is no guarantee that it is safe from future destruction.

The Problem of Transit Transportation

Most of Armenia’s passenger transportation passes through Upper Lars checkpoint. Elibekyan underlines the importance of Upper Lars in the cargo and passenger transportation of Armenia and the accessibility of tourism, which is directly linked to transport availability.⁶² However, according to official records, the flow of passenger cars passing through the checkpoint has doubled in 2018 compared to the previous year, exceeding the transport capacity of Lars and often causing kilometers-long queues.⁶³ The problem extends further due to the mountainous area the checkpoint is located at. The Georgian military road that passes through Lars is usually unstable during the winter as a result of harsh weather conditions that very often cause heavy snowfalls and avalanches, making the road impenetrable and in constant need of repair.⁶⁴ The rest of the year, Lars sometimes has to be closed down due to floods and landslides.

Minasyan highlights the South Ossetian Rock tunnel as an alternative. However, given the complicated relations between Georgia, Russia, and South Ossetia, it is not likely to be carried out soon.⁶⁵ For

⁶² Gita Elibekyan, “Upper Lars: Armenia’s Lifeline”, *EVN Report*, December 17, 2018, <https://www.evnreport.com/economy/upper-lars-armenia-s-lifeline>.

⁶³ Hashvetvutyun Hayastani Hanrapetutyan Transporti, Kapi yev Teghekatvakan Tekhnologianeri Nakharari Gortsughman Ardyunqneri Masin [Report on the Results of the Business Trip of the Minister of Transport, Communications and Information Technologies of the Republic of Armenia], <https://www.gov.am/files/docs/2899.pdf?c=305814>

⁶⁴ Austeja Judzentyte, *The Georgian Military Road*. Political Architecture: Critical Sustainability (2017). https://kadk.dk/sites/default/files/project-downloads/pacs_austeja_judzentyte.pdf.

⁶⁵ Sergey Minasyan, “Armenia and Georgia: Potential of Mutual Transit in the Context of Trade Economic and Political Cooperation of Two Countries”, *Regional Dialogue*, September 16, 2016, <http://regional-dialogue.com/en/armenia-and-georgia-potential-of->

Elibekyan a more sensible solution is the realization of the 2011 Agreement on Customs Monitoring of Cargoes that implies the construction of two new roads that will pass through Abkhazia and South Ossetia, respectively.⁶⁶ The reopening of the Abkhaz railway that connected Abkhazia to Russia in Soviet times but stopped operation in 1993 is also seen as an alternative. Through the Abkhaz railway, Armenian transport network will assuredly improve by the reduced cost of trade. Moreover, it will contribute to developing tourism in Armenia and ending its regional isolation.⁶⁷ From an economic perspective, the opening of railway traffic with Russia through Abkhazia would reduce the cost of transport by 15-20%, as there would no longer be a need for ferry transportation. Moreover, the traffic would be accelerated by more than a week that, in turn, would reduce the cost of imported and exported commodities due to the cut in invested working capital.⁶⁸

The significance of Georgia for Armenia is also emphasized by the fact that the latter is a landlocked country with no sea access. According to the 1965 New York Convention adopted by the United Nations Conference on Transit Trade of Landlocked Countries that began to be enforced in 1967, all landlocked states should have free access to the sea as much as coastal states. The Convention consists of eight main principles that define the rights and obligations of landlocked countries. It recognizes the equal rights of those countries of transit trade while entering ports and shipping cargo. In these cases, the landlocked states are exempted from customs. Armenia joined the 1965 convention in 2013.⁶⁹ The Georgian ports Batumi and Poti provide access to the sea for a significant share of the shipments coming to and from Armenia. The Georgian government levies 30% transit custom duties for using its

mutual-transit-in-the-context-of-trade-economic-and-political-cooperation-of-two-countries/.

⁶⁶ Elibekyan, "Upper Lars"

⁶⁷ Mikhelidze, "After the 2008 Russia-Georgia War, 27-42.

⁶⁸ Natalia Mirimanova, et al., *Rehabilitation of the Railways in the South Caucasus: Assessment of the potential Economic Benefits: Sochi-Sukhum/i-Tbilisi-Yerevan railway*, International Alert (2013), 31, https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Caucasus_RailwaysRehabilitationPt1_EN_2013.pdf.

⁶⁹ Chapter X: International Trade and Development, 3. Convention on transit trade of land-locked states, UN Treaty Collection, Last updated: Dec 12, 2019, <https://treaties.un.org/Pages/PageNotFound.aspx>.

territory and an additional 200 GEL (around \$75) for the entrance and exit of every truck.⁷⁰

Despite the abundance of literature, there are numerous gaps in parts of the issues mentioned above. Starting with the historical background, namely the problem of the Lori and Javakhk territorial dispute, there is a lack of arguments in the literature regarding the relevance of the Georgian-Armenian War of 1918 and its effect on the current predicaments and tensions between the two countries. Particularly, most authors do not mention the absence of full demarcation of the border, which is the direct result of this short war and serves as the basis for disagreements. Additionally, many articles and books about the divergent foreign policy priorities of Armenia and Georgia were published several years ago and do not cover recent developments.

Returning to the problems of Javakhk Armenians, the existing literature is obviously outdated, therefore, the current situation is uncertain. Very few sources address the problems of Tbilisi Armenians, and those that do, are a decade old. The same can be said about the issue of the disputes regarding the ownership of churches. The literature also does not cover the current status of the transportation problem, the present status of the Lars checkpoint issue, as well as the difficulties of Armenian cargo export companies that use Georgian ports.

Methodology and Design

The main variables of this study are the major and minor differences and controversies between Armenia and Georgia that shape the relationship of the two countries. Hence, the research question is as follows:

- What are the major problems that serve as obstacles to the development and enhancement of Armenian-Georgian relations?

The initial assumptions are drawn from personal observation and knowledge. The hypothesis is developed accordingly:

- Armenian-Georgian relations have been challenged by historical tensions, as well as by diverging foreign policy priorities.

This study is based on explanatory research design in an attempt to understand the cause and effect of the external and internal factors that

⁷⁰ Grigor Nazaryan et al, *Tsoyayin Yelq Chunetsogh Yerkrneri Mijazgayin Mrstunakutyayn Himmakhndirneri (HH orinakov) [The Problems of Landlocked Countries' International Competitiveness (The Armenian case)]*. (Yerevan, Amberd" Matenashar, 2014), 65-78, <https://asue.am/upload/files/amberd-competition/Nazaryan.pdf>.

affect Armenian-Georgian relations and to analyze to what extent those factors can be regarded as challenges.

The method is mainly qualitative. Secondary data is collected from the media sources that cover recent developments. The first part is generally based on the existing academic literature. The second part, called "Analysis," is aimed at filling in the gaps of the literature through primary data. Four interviews were conducted with a questionnaire designed on the basis of secondary data. First, an expert on Armenian-Georgian relations answered several questions concerning different aspects of bilateral relations. Second, representatives of three Armenian cargo transportation companies were interviewed. The interviewees were chosen based on purposive sampling.

Foreign Policy Vectors

Unlike Saakashvili's administration, the policies of today's Georgian government are rather cautious in order to avoid antagonizing Russia. Despite the absence of diplomatic relations, the political elites of the two states maintain constant communication. Measures have been undertaken to activate the trade and transportation channels between the two countries⁷¹. In 2011, Georgia reached an agreement with a Swiss company named "Société Générale de Surveillance" (SGS) that provides for the establishment of three trade corridors between Georgia and Russia. Two of these corridors run through Abkhazia and South Ossetia, under SGS monitoring (Switzerland acts as mediator since diplomatic relations were broken off in 2008)⁷². Finally, in 2018, Russia also signed a contract with SGS as a condition for its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) that had been previously vetoed by Georgia.⁷³ However, despite cooperation between Russia and Georgia in the economic sphere, the two countries still hold fundamentally opposing

⁷¹ "Pragmatic but Principled: Georgia Opts for Less Confrontation with Russia And the EU is Happy with That", *The Economist*, January 11, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2018/01/11/georgia-opts-for-less-confrontation-with-russia>.

⁷² "Georgia's Contract with Swiss Company Ensures Implementation of 2011 Russia-Georgia Cargo Traffic Deal," *Agenda.ge*, December 21, 2017, <http://agenda.ge/en/news/2017/2793>.

⁷³ Giorgi Menabde, "Abkhazia and South Ossetia 'Block' Transit Agreement Between Russia and Georgia", *The Jamestown Foundation*, February 22, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/abkhazia-and-south-ossetia-block-transit-agreement-between-russia-and-georgia/>.

political views regarding the Abkhaz and South Ossetian problems, as well as in foreign policy. In January 2019, the Prime Minister of Georgia, Mamuka Bakhtadze, told the American *CNBC* that the Russian “occupation of 20% of the Georgian territory” is the greatest challenge for Georgia.⁷⁴ In its turn, Russia is still greatly concerned with Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations, yet the latter does not intend to make a shift in its foreign policy course because of the fear of public backlash. In its foreign policy strategy for 2019-2022 (adopted in March 2019), two of the five main priorities noted are security and territorial integrity, as well as EU and NATO integration.⁷⁵

After the change in government in Armenia in May 2018 as a result of a few weeks of peaceful protests and the former opposition leader, Nikol Pashinyan, was elected PM, it was still uncertain whether Yerevan would change its foreign policy vector and pursue integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions. Before coming to power, the current Armenian PM was an ardent critic of enhancing relations with Russia and participating in Russia-led organizations, especially EAEU. Hence, there was a notion that the Armenian-Russian relationship might change dramatically. However, both during the protests and after taking office, Pashinyan has always ensured his Russian counterparts that he is going to stay committed to Armenia’s foreign policy priorities and does not intend to leave EAEU, CSTO, or CIS. Some experts are of the opinion that Pashinyan’s stance is determined by the unresolved conflict of Nagorno Karabakh and the closed border with Turkey. In this sense, cooperation with Russia provides more security alternatives for Armenia rather than the West, in addition to Armenia’s dependency on Russia as its major trading partner and investor in the Armenian economy.⁷⁶⁷⁷ Simultaneously,

⁷⁴Holly Elyatt, “Russia is Still Occupying 20% of Our Country, Georgia’s Prime Minister Says”, *CNBC*, January 22, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/01/22/russia-is-still-occupying-20percent-of-our-country-georgias-leader-says.html>.

⁷⁵ “Georgian Government Adopts Foreign Policy Strategy for 2019-2022”, *The Caucasus Watch*, April 2, 2019, <http://caucasuswatch.de/news/1458.html?fbclid=IwAR1xwuliWFIns24vPfcYtNWNrhYhBQOBkfD3oslY54r1EoHlaSXyIFJNXi4>.

⁷⁶Alexander Markarov, “Armenia’s Foreign Policy Priorities. Are There Any Major Changes Following the Spring 2018 Political Transformation?”, *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, no. 104 (2018): 3-7, <https://www.laender-analysen.de/cad/pdf/CaucasusAnalyticalDigest104.pdf>.

⁷⁷ Amanda Paul, & Dennis Sammut, “Armenia’s ‘Velvet Revolution’: Time is Pashinyan’s worst enemy”. *European Policy Center*, May 30, 2018,

Armenia's previous and current governments have sought to deepen the cooperation with the EU with the help of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), signed in November 2017. The document is still in the process of ratification by the 28 EU member-states (13 EU countries and Armenia have ratified it so far).⁷⁸

For Armenia, an actual obstacle in the relations with its northern neighbor is the growing Turkish and Azerbaijani presence in Georgia. Much has been spoken and written about the undisguised intention of Turkey and Azerbaijan to isolate Armenia in the South Caucasus through their cooperation with Georgia in regional projects. Turkish-Azerbaijani influence in Georgia increases day by day and creates potential threats for both Armenians living there and the Republic of Armenia itself. A notable incident took place in February 2019 when a group of Azerbaijanis initiated a protest in front of the Georgian Parliament against the rededication of the statue of Miqayel Avagyan, an Armenian fighter during the Karabakh War that was inaugurated the previous month in Bughashen, a village located near Akhalkalaki. Some Georgian activists also participated in the demonstration. The protesters were demanding that Georgian authorities dismantle the statue. According to them, Avagyan was a "separatist" who took part not only in the Karabagh War but also in the Abkhaz War.⁷⁹ Some Armenian sources mention that this protest was initiated intentionally by Azerbaijani authorities to provoke tensions between Armenia and Georgia, especially in the territory of Javakhk.⁸⁰

Another disturbing episode of the Turkish-Azerbaijani presence in Georgia occurred quite recently, April 24, 2019. April 24th is the commemoration day of the Armenian Genocide, which Armenians in

http://www.epnk.org/sites/default/files/page-files/pub_8568_armeniasvelvetrevolution.pdf.

⁷⁸ "The Swedish parliament ratifies CEPA between Armenia and EU", *Arka.am*, May 3, 2019,

http://arka.am/en/news/politics/sweden_parliament_ratifies_cepa_between_armenia_and_eu/.

⁷⁹ "Vrastani Adrbejantsinery Pahanjum en Apamontazhel Miqayel Avagyani Kisandrin [Georgia's Azerbaijanis Demand the Demolition of Miqayel Avagyan's Statue]", *168.am*, February 8, 2019, <https://blog.168.am/blog/200058.html>.

⁸⁰ "Adrbejani Npatakay Hay-Vratsakan Bakhum Hrahreln e [Azerbaijan's Goal is Provoking an Armenian-Georgian Clash]", *Panorama.am*, February 9, 2019, <https://www.panorama.am/am/news/2019/02/09/%D4%B1%D5%A4%D6%80%D5%A2%D5%A5%D5%BB%D5%A1%D5%B6%D5%AB-%D5%B6%D5%BA%D5%A1%D5%BF%D5%A1%D5%AF%D5%A8/2070744>.

Georgia usually spend protesting in front of the Turkish Embassy. This year the Turkish Embassy had decided to celebrate children's day on April 24th by organizing an event in front of the embassy and hung children's drawings of Ataturk. In Turkey, this day is traditionally celebrated on the 23th of April.⁸¹The incident angered Armenians who believe Tbilisi's municipality to be responsible and consider it a "humiliating attitude toward the Armenian community."⁸²

It was interesting to note that after being elected in December 2018, Salome Zurbishvili paid her first official regional visit to Azerbaijan. In her meeting with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, Zurbishvili mentioned the "friendly and prospective relations" between the two countries. Furthermore, she told Aliyev that Georgia and Azerbaijan "have witnessed similar problems in the recent years"...they [Georgians] know what "occupation" means for a country "when the territorial integrity is not yet restored."⁸³Basically, Zurbishvili expressed her compassion and support to Azerbaijan in regard to the Karabagh conflict. This announcement became a matter of criticism and anger in Armenian society. Several Armenian news outlets characterized Zurbishvili's statements as "unbalanced" and "dangerous for Armenian-Georgian relations."⁸⁴

Javakhk and Tbilisi Armenians

The Turkish-Azerbaijani influence is an especially thorny issue for Javakhk Armenians. Since the inauguration of the Kars-Akhalkalaki (or

⁸¹ "Vrastanum Tseghaspanutyun Aktsiayi Phonin Turqery Tsutsahandesen Antskatsrel Ataturki Nkarerov [In the Background of the Genocide Action in Georgia, Turks Held an Exhibition with Ataturk's Paintings]", *Armedia.am*, April 24, 2019, <https://armedia.am/arm/news/70562/vrastanum-cexaspanutyun-akciayi-fonin-turqery-cucahahandes-en-anckacrel-ataturqi-nkarerov.html>

⁸²"Tbilisium Turqakan Despanatan Arjev Turqery Mankakan Mijocarum en Irakanatsnum, Hayery' 'Pahanjum yev Hatutsum' Khoragrov Boghoqi Aktsia [In Front of the Turkish Embassy in Tbilisi Turks are Carrying out an Event for Children, Armenians – a Protest titled 'We are Demanding a Retribution']", *Tert.am*, April 24, 2019, <https://www.tert.am/am/news/2019/04/24/protest/2982109>.

⁸³ "Zurbishvilin Vorpes Vrastani Nakhagah Taratsashrjanayin Arajin Aytsy Katarum e Adrbejan [As Georgian President, Zurbishvili Pays Her First Official Regional Visit to Azerbaijan]", *Azatutyun Radiokayan*, February 27, 2019, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/29793876.html>.

⁸⁴ "Yerevan' Bakvi Haytarutyunnerits Heto: Vrastani Nakhagahi Aytsin Yndaraj [To Yerevan After Making Announcements in Baku: Toward the Visit of Georgia's President]", *Civilnet*, March 11, 2019, www.civilnet.am/news/2019/03/11/Երևան-Ինքնիշխանության հայտարարությունները Կարս-Ախալքալակի-այցին-ընդառաջ/356336.

Baku-Tbilisi-Kars) railway in October 2017, the Turkish- Azerbaijani presence started to grow significantly in Akhalkalaki due to a terminal which serves as a “hub in the region” in terms of the movement of goods and passengers. It is also important to emphasize that the Akhalkalaki terminal is only 30-kilometers away from the Armenian border⁸⁵, which can be regarded as a potential threat to the security of the RA. In 2017, the Armenian PM at the time, Karen Karapetyan, visited Tbilisi where he discussed the problems of Javakhk Armenians along with other questions concerning bilateral relations. According to Karapetyan, they mainly addressed the educational problems of Javakhk Armenians.⁸⁶ In an interview with the newspaper “Past,” Shirak Torosyan notes that despite the importance of educational issues in Javakhk, it was more urgent to place the issue of the Turkish- Azerbaijani presence that threatens Javakhk Armenians in the agenda.⁸⁷

Regarding recent developments in the sphere of education in Javakhk, Salome Zurabishvili’s April 2019 visit to Javakhk dedicated to the “day of the mother language,” where she encouraged Armenians to start learning Georgian to become full-fledged citizens, should be noted.⁸⁸ Eduard Ayvazyan, director of the Samtskhe-Javakhk Media Analytical Center, explains that several years ago, many people in Javakhk were granted Armenian citizenship and lost their Georgian one. Granting them Georgian citizenship was one of the pre-electoral pledges of Zurabishvili, which is possible only by taking an exam on the Georgian language. However, the level of knowledge of Georgian is quite low among Javakhk Armenians. Although there is a tendency among the youth to continue education in Tbilisi, it does not guarantee future employment as ethnic Armenians are discriminated from getting both state and non-state jobs in Georgia. Ayvazyan also highlights some existing problems in

⁸⁵ VahramTer-Matevosyan, “Opening of the Akhalkalak-Kars Railway: What to do Now?” *EVN Report*, November 5, 2017, <https://www.evnreport.com/politics/opening-of-the-akhalkalak-kars-railway-what-to-do-now>.

⁸⁶ “Karen Karapetyany Vrastanum Abkhazakan Yerkatgtsi Aylyntranqayin Tarberak E Qnnarkel [“Karen Karapetyan Discussed a Variant of an Alternative Road to the Abkhaz Railway]”, *Aravot.am*, March 1, 2017, <https://www.aravot.am/2017/03/01/860844/>.

⁸⁷ “Javakhahayutyany Khndirneri Hayastani ev Vrastani Varchapeteri Qnnarkumneri Orakargum [The Problems of Javakhk Armenians in the Discussion Agendas of Armenian and Georgian Prime Ministers]”, *Slaq.am*, March 4, 2017, <http://www.slaq.am/arm/news/1161914/>.

⁸⁸ Gevorg Stamboltsyan, “Vrastani Nakhagahy Javakhahayerin Koch e Arel Vratseren Sovorel [“Georgia’s President Calls for Javakhk Armenians to Learn Georgian]”, *Azatutyun Radiokayan*, April 15, 2019, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/29881386.html>.

Since 2014, the Armenian Diocese has embarked on activity over its ownership of Armenian churches by negotiating with the Georgian authorities.⁹² The Right Rev. Bishop Vazgen Mirzakhanyan, the previous Primate of the Armenian Diocese in Georgia, considers the problem of churches the most important challenge for the Diocese, which should be resolved primarily by law.⁹³ Currently, the Armenian Diocese is actively fighting for ownership of Tandoyants Church in Tbilisi.⁹⁴ In April 2018, the Georgian authorities started construction in the area of the church. Even the Georgian Ombudsman, Nino Lomjaria, strictly criticized this action, calling it a “discriminatory attitude toward the dominant religious group.”⁹⁵

Transit Transportation

Taking into account the problematic nature of the Georgian military road that passes through the Upper Lars checkpoint, the literature urges the pursuit of an alternative. Back in 2017, Karen Karapetyan told journalists that he had reached an agreement with his Georgian counterpart on an alternative road to Lars, but he did not provide further details regarding the project.⁹⁶ However, this problem has not yet been solved, probably because it is not dependent on the Armenian side. Instead, it is rather a matter of Georgian-Russian bilateral relations. Today, the only alternative to Lars is the ferry route that passes through

Armenia, The Disputes Over the Armenian Churches in Georgia Have Intensified”, *Azatutyun Radiokayan*, March 22, 2019, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/29835757.html>.

⁹² “Virahayots Temi Arajnord: Yekeghetsineri Veradardzman Patet Knerkayatsvi Vrastanin [Primate of the Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Georgia Churches' return package to be presented to Georgia]”, *Mediamax*, November 18, 2014, <https://www.mediamax.am/am/news/interviews/12321/>.

⁹³ Gevorgyan, A., “Vrastani Haykakan Hushardzanneri Khndiry Orensdrakan Lutsman Kariq Uni [The Problem of Armenian Monuments in Georgia Needs a Legislative Solution]”, *ArmRadio*, November 1, 2018, <https://hy.armradio.am/2018/11/01/georg-2/>.

⁹⁴ “Virahayots Temy Boghoqarkum e Tandoyants Surb Astvatsatsin Yekeghetsu Hartsov Tbilisii Qaghaqayin Datarani Kayatsrats Voroshumy [Georgian-Armenian Diocese Appeals to Tbilisi City Court on Tandoyants St. Virgin Church]”, *Media Analytic Centre*, March 20, 2019, mediaanalytic.org/2019/03/20/վիրահայոց-թեմը-բողոքարկում-է-թանդոյա/

⁹⁵ “Tandoyants Yekeghetsin Haykakan e - Vrastani Ombudsmen” [The Tandoyants Church is Armenian. Ombudsman of Georgia]”, *News.Itv.am*, April 5, 2018, www.1lurer.am/hy/2018/04/05/Թանդոյանց-էկեղեցին-հայկական-է-Վրաստանի-օմբուդսմեն/88905.

⁹⁶ “Hayastany yev Vrastany Hamadzaynutyan enYekel Verin Larsi Aylyntranqi Hartsi Shurj: Karen Karapetyan [Armenia And Georgia Agree On Upper Lars Alternative Karen Karapetyan]”, *Armenpress*, February 24, 2017, <https://armenpress.am/arm/news/880153/>.

the Georgian ports, Batumi and Poti. In November 2018, the acting deputy PM of Armenia, Tigran Avinyan announced that the issue of prices for using Georgian ports is on the Armenian-Georgian negotiation table.⁹⁷ However, no tangible results have been achieved on this front as of yet.

The Border Demarcation

In June 2017, Deputy Foreign Minister of Armenia Shavarsh Kocharyan met with his Georgian counterpart at the time, Davit Dondua, where they had a consultation on a wide range of bilateral questions including the border demarcation problem. The sides agreed on continuing the discussions regarding this issue.⁹⁸ During her first official visit to Armenia in March 2019, Salome Zurabishvili urged at the joint press conference with Armenian President Armen Sargsyan that “it is time to demarcate the border.” She also highlighted that “it is unacceptable to delay that process between the two friendly nations,” as well as that the regulation of the contract is already agreed upon.⁹⁹ However, there is no official record regarding what is currently in progress.

Analysis

Today, the biggest challenge that may affect Armenia’s relations with its northern neighbor is the increasing Turkish-Azerbaijani presence in Georgia. According to a researcher from the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia and an expert on Armenian-Georgian relations who preferred to stay anonymous, Turkey and Azerbaijan have historically been seeking a land route that will connect these two fraternal countries. However, as the Armenian-populated Javakhk obstructs this link, the Turk-Azerbaijani “alliance” has adopted a policy to “absorb” Javakhk by

⁹⁷ “Batumi yev Poti Navahangistnerits Ogtvelu Sakagnery Kveranayven? Parzabanum e Tigran Avinyany [Will the Tariffs for the Ports of Batumi and Poti Be Revised? Tigran Avinyan Clarifies]”, *Shant News*, November 14, 2018, <https://www.shantnews.am/news/view/208319.html>.

⁹⁸ “Hay-Vratsakan Khorhrdaksutyunner Nakharameri Teghakarner Shavarsh Kocharyani yev Davit Donduayi Makardakov [Armenian-Georgian consultations at the level of Deputy Ministers Shavarsh Kocharyan and David Dondua]”, *Aravot.am*, June 7, 2017, <https://www.aravot.am/2017/06/07/890445/>.

⁹⁹ “Salome Zurabishvili Andradardzel e Hayastani yev Vrastani Mijev Sahmanagtsman Hartsin” [Salome Zurabishvili addresses border demarcation issue between Armenia and Georgia]”, *ArmeniaSputnik.am*, March 13, 2019, <https://armeniasputnik.am/region/20190313/17682361/salome-zurabishvili-andradarcele-hayastani-u-vrastani-mijev-sahmanagtsman-harcin.html>.

bringing the region under Turkish-Azerbaijani economic and political influence through various projects (energy sector, direct investments). They emphasize that Javakhk is the “trachea” of Armenia. Therefore, the growing Turkish-Azerbaijani presence threatens not only the region but also Armenia itself.

Another way to preserve the Armenian community in Javakhk is granting Armenian second language status in Georgia. The forced learning of Georgian in “artificial ways” (i.e. all the official documents in Georgia are in the Georgian and Abkhazian languages that the majority of Armenians do not understand) increases emigration rates among Armenians. According to the anonymous researcher, until 2009, Armenian authorities were guided by the reluctance to anger Georgia and did not speak about this problem on an official level. Only in September 2009 did Serj Sargsyan, in a meeting with Georgian officials, mention that the status of Armenian as a second language would improve relations between the two countries. However, this statement has not reached a practical level and was met with harsh criticism in Georgia.

Continuing the topic of the language problem, the expert stresses that although Tbilisi Armenians know Georgian quite well, it does not prevent them from facing difficulties. Whenever an Armenian living in Tbilisi applies for a job, preference is always given to a Georgian candidate. To get employment and become a full citizen, Armenians have to change their surnames to Georgian ones. Sargsyan describes it as a “process of ethnic assimilation,” which is especially disturbing in Tbilisi, highlighting the intention of Georgian authorities to achieve homogeneity. The discriminatory attitude of Georgian authorities at the border can be applied to the same context. The expert mentions a number of cases when Georgians working at the Armenian-Georgian border checkpoint have taken Armenian books, newspapers, or journals from people crossing the border en route to Georgia, and, in some extreme cases, even have forbidden the entrance of some Armenians (i.e. the expert themselves, Shirak Torosyan, Samvel Karapetyan).

It may be concluded from the interview that Armenia's security may significantly be challenged by Turkish-Azerbaijani cooperation with Georgia. The only way to counter it is building a strong and stable Armenian community in Georgia, especially in the territories bordering Armenia. It is possible only by responding to the problems of Javakhk Armenians and speaking up for their rights in front of Georgian

authorities. However, given the current geopolitical constraints and Armenia's dependency on Georgia as a transit country, it is not quite feasible to conduct effective diplomacy without jeopardizing bilateral relations.

Returning to the problem of transportation, the CEO of "APAVEN," a big Armenian freight forwarding company, surprisingly states that the Upper Lars does not cause too much trouble for them and usually the company does not suffer significant losses due to long queues. He mentions that although the reopening of the Abkhaz railway would be better, they understand that the possibility of an alternative road does not depend on Armenia. "APAVEN" also uses Georgian ports for exporting and importing goods and pays the fixed 200 GEL entrance and exit fee. The CEO is not aware that there is an opportunity to negotiate the prices in the framework of the 1965 UN agreement on the Transit Trade of Landlocked Countries.

Another company called "Megatrans" regards Upper Lars as a big problem. They often raise this issue among governmental circles mainly when Lars shuts down, yet they do not expect any tangible results. The representative of the company is also not aware of the possibility of reducing the 200 GEL fixed fee for using Georgian ports.

The representative of a third company, "Unitrans," mentions that they do not lose money due to Lars as they prefer outsourcing trucks from other companies. Those companies suffer financial losses when Lars is closed. The same applies to the problem of Georgian ports (the outsourced companies pay the fixed fee themselves).

The interviews with these cargo transportation companies show that opinions differ regarding the level of hardships that arise due to the aforementioned trade issues. Even though there is a need for an alternative transit road for Armenia, this issue does not affect Armenian-Georgian relations very much. It is a salient fact that Armenia is not a decision-maker in this question.

Conclusion

Georgia is of vital importance for Armenia as a transit corridor. Armenia has always sought to maintain friendly relations with its northern neighbor despite a range of problems between them that are the result of both external and internal factors. The question posed at the beginning was aimed at revealing those problems and understanding their

causes and current developments. Meanwhile, the initial assumption that the relations between Armenia and Georgia have been complicated by historical tensions and diverging foreign policy priorities is proven to be partially wrong. Indeed, historical tensions and different foreign policy priorities have played some role in shaping the current relationship, but not to the extent of inviting complete attention. A number of other major and minor issues have been elaborated upon, such as problems of the Armenian community in Georgia, the ownership of the cultural heritage and the brutal attitude of Georgian authorities toward Armenian historical monuments, difficulties in transit communication, as well as diverging perceptions regarding sovereignty and the resolution of territorial disputes, and, finally, the incompletely demarcated border.