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SUB-COMMITTEE ON DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

MINORITIES IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: FACTOR OF INSTABILITY?

DRAFT REPORT

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* Until this document has been approved by the Committee on the Civil Dimension of Security, it represents only the views of the Rapporteur.

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1. Since they gained their independence from the Soviet Union, powerful movements towards depopulation and ethnic conflict have led to increasing mono-ethnicity in states of the South Caucasus. Having lost the overarching protection of the Soviet central government—which guaranteed minority participation in public life and educational opportunities—and largely escaped the attention of the international community, minorities seem to be the net losers in the changes of the independence period.

Demographic trends, 1989 – 2004

	Population		
	1989	**2004**	**Current growth rate**
Armenia	3.304,353	2,991,360	-0.32%
Azerbaijan	7,021,200	7,868,385	0.52%
Georgia	5.5 million	4,693,892, including South Ossetia (est. pop. 160,000) and Abkhazia (est. pop. 70,000)	-0.36%

Source: 2004 CIA Factbook, Eurasianet.org, all are official datas, see doc of reference in appendix

2. This report will examine the condition of minorities in the Caucasus region, surveying the potential for conflict and instability emanating from their interactions with majority groups and neighboring states. This analysis will be based on the assumption that minorities in the Caucasus can be loosely categorized as religious, ethnic, or transnational in character based on bases of their shared identity or condition. Where these groups overlap, as they often do, they are classified according to the attribute most relevant to the instability—past, present or potential—arising as a result of their interactions with the majority group. Thus, while diaspora populations often share both a common religion and ethnicity, they are identified in this report as transnational minorities by virtue of the fact that they identify with and/or have the sympathy and support of the neighbouring state, engendering the possibility of inter-state conflict.

3. Emigration from the three South Caucasus states - Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia - has been motivated both by war and ethnic hostilities as well as by falling living standards and economic malaise. Minority populations are most likely to emigrate. As mass emigration gives rise to more and more mono-ethnic communities and regions, the status quo has increasingly become “balkanization” rather than peaceful co-existence, with political culture is increasingly characterized by insularity and exclusive ethnic nationalism that provides for little of tolerance by majority populations of minorities. In a region that once hosted substantial ethnic and religious diversity, today the often-strained interactions between the region’s religious, ethnic, and trans-national minority groups and the majorities they live among threatens to imbalance the region’s precarious stability.

I. TRANS-NATIONAL MINORITIES

4. As mentioned in the introduction, this report classifies diaspora populations that identify with and/or have the sympathy and support of the neighbouring state as Trans-National Minorities. As such, it analyses the interaction between diaspora populations - and, when appropriate, the states that support them - and the majority population of the state in which the territory they occupy from the standpoint of the degree to which these relations could produce an inter-state conflict.

5. The separatist movements that encourage the insularity, regional concentration, and eventual claim to independence of these diasporas can be divided into two categories: potential and ongoing.

II. POTENTIAL SEPARATIST MOVEMENTS

A. JAVAKHETI (GEORGIA)

6. Tension between **Georgia** proper and the **Armenian diaspora in Javakheti**—where the latter makes up 95 percent of the population—have increased in recent years, as diaspora groups increasingly raise the issue of autonomy an anti-Armenian sentiment and xenophobic attitudes in Georgia continues to rise.

7. Historical and cultural factors have combined to create a sense of insularity, exclusive ethnic identity and suspicion of outsiders among the Armenian minority in Georgia. All of these tendencies are reinforced by this population's nearly homogeneous ethnic composition, generally lacking Georgian language skills and poor communications with the rest of the country (see doc of reference in appendix). Today, the region remains politically, economically and culturally isolated from the capital. There are strong feelings of mistrust for the central government, which does not exercise effective influence in Javakheti.

8. The Georgian authorities have also cited opposition from the Armenian population as a complicating factor in the repatriation of the Meskhetians to the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, where they lived before being deported in 1944. While such perceptions among Armenians are indeed widespread, only 12 of the 220 villages that Meskhetians were originally deported from are located in Armenian-populated territory, while 86 villages are deserted (see doc of reference in appendix).

9. As a result, some observers have speculated that the Javakheti region may be the "most crucial single region in the South Caucasus today." This assessment is based on the relatively high tensions in the area, its isolation from the rest of Georgia, and the devastating implications that a conflict there could have both for Georgia's statehood and for regional peace and stability. In the worst-case scenario, observers say, potential armed conflict between Georgian and ethnic Armenian groups in Javakheti could be the starting point for a general South Caucasian war (see doc of reference in appendix).

10. Very recently, the leaders of United Javakheti, an Armenian public organization active in the Javakheti region, rallied thousands of people to protest the socio-economic hardships experienced by the Armenian community there. Thousands of Armenians—estimates range widely, from 3, 000 – 9,000—joined the demonstration, which went ahead as planned in spite of attempts by the Georgian police to prevent it. Protesters' demands included a stop to the withdrawal of the Russian military base there (based on the damage foreseen to the local economy and the need for protection against a Turkish invasion like the one that occurred after WWI); the recognition by the Georgian Parliament of the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1923; and the ratification of a law protecting the rights of national minorities in Georgia (see doc of reference in appendix).

B. KVEMO-KARTLI (GEORGIA)

11. According to the Soviet census taken in 1989, approximately 300,000 **Azeris** lived in **Georgia**. While the OSCE estimates that as many as 50,000 Azeris have emigrated since then—due either to economic difficulties or social conditions—birth rates remain high. Estimates of Georgia's current Azeri population range between 250,000 and 500,000, the majority of which live in the south-western Kvemo Kartli region, where they account for nearly half of the population. Some 18,000 also live in Tbilisi. (See doc of reference in appendix) .

12. In 2004, tensions between Georgia's Azeri minority and the state began rising after Georgian security forces raided Azeri border villages in Kvemo Kartli and arrested a number of residents in

connection with a crackdown cross-border smuggling. Following these incidents, Baku-based newspapers put forth allegations of extortion, arbitrary detentions, and other forms of harassment against Azeri community leaders by their Georgian authorities. On May 25, 2004, over 400 ethnic Azeris gathered to protest what they claim is an ongoing campaign of repression by Kvemo-Kartli's governor, Soso Mazmishvili, a member of Saakashvili's ruling National Movement bloc (see doc of reference in appendix).

13. Governor Mazmishvili has denied any wrongdoing, and told Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty that such accusations are unfounded. "All these reports about alleged violations of ethnic Azeris' rights are out of place. What [these people in Baku] say or write is sheer provocation," he said. "Neither I nor any other Georgian has had any conflict [with ethnic Azeris]. There can be no talk of rights violations against [Georgia's] Azeris."(see doc of reference in appendix)

III. ONGOING SEPARATIST MOVEMENTS

14. In none of the unresolved conflicts of the South Caucasus do the separatist powers (Abkhaz, Ossetian or Karabakh) exhibit a discernible desire to remain in 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 as well as poverty in these regions. The common perception is that, if incorporated back into their original states, the separatists would have much to lose in particular their security and their dominant political position.

15. In this way, the conflicts have become "frozen," but not solved: while Georgia and Azerbaijan both seem unlikely to reconcile themselves to the loss of these territories, neither has proven able to re-incorporate them. 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, ongoing processes of political transition in both countries may bring unresolved conflicts back into focus to be exploited by the politically ambitious. Third, the persistence of local conflicts largely hampers the development of regional co-operations.

A. ABKHAZIA AND SOUTH OSSETIA (GEORGIA)

16. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russian-oriented separatists have fought for secession from Georgia. While observers indicate that the issue of South Ossetia rests largely on economic concerns, however (*The Economist* has suggested that enclave might be described as "a smuggling racket with a patch of land attached" -see doc of reference in appendix) it is generally agreed that the situation in Abkhazia is more complex.

17. At the time of the last Soviet census in 1989, Abkhazia had a population of about 500,000, of which only 17% were ethnic Abkhaz. At that time, 48% of the region's population were Georgians (principally Mingrelians), with the rest made up by Armenians and Russians, both representing around 15% of the population (OSCE background information, 2004).

18. In 1993, a major war led the province to declare its independance from Georgia, during which virtually the entire Georgian population—about 250,000 people, or 46% of Abkhazia's total population—were displaced in what was alleged to be a campaign of ethnic cleansing. While a ceacefire agreement was signed in 1994 and a new constitution adopted the same year, the conflict has not been formally resolved and the breakaway republic's sovereignty is not recognized either by Tbilisi or by the international community.

19. The ceasefire line is patrolled by Russian troops under the aegis of the Commonwealth of Independent States Peacekeeping Forces (CISPRF) as agreed at the Moscow Treaty of 1994. The United Nations (UN) assumed the mediating in the conflict in Abkhazia and a UN Observer

Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) monitors the border area. Both UN staff and Russian peacekeepers have been killed in attacks and ambushes by Guerrilla troops.

20. Open hostilities broke out twice in the border region of Gali, in May 1998 and October 2001, when Chechen fighters and Georgian paramilitaries launched an offensive. Abkhazia quickly mobilised and fought back, forcing the attackers to flee (see doc of ref in appendix). In autumn of 2002, both sides were on the brink of confrontation following military activity in Kodori valley, partly controlled by Georgian and partly by the Abkhaz side. Since then, de-escalation took place, but tensions run high.

21. In past years, Abkhazia has achieved increasing de-facto independence from Georgia. Abkhaz leadership proclaimed formal independence in November 1999, following a referendum. Russia's introduction of a visa regime for Georgian citizens in 2000—with the exemption of those in Abkhazia and South Ossetia—has further encouraged the incorporation of these territories into Russia's economic and social space. In 2001, the breakaway republic—which had already adopted the Russian Rouble as its main currency and was almost totally reliant on Moscow for its economic survival—expressed the desire to apply for 'Associate Status' with the Russian Federation.

22. By 2002, 70% of Abkhazians were estimated to have taken on Russian citizenship. Abkhazians cited a host of reasons for this decision, including the desire to receive a Russian pension – worth around fifty times more than one in Abkhazia – to being able to travel abroad (because the republic's sovereignty is not internationally recognised, Abkhazian "citizens" are considered stateless by the international community). As Abkhazian "Prime Minister" Anri Djergenia summarized, Russian citizenship means protection: "the more Russian citizens live in Abkhazia," he said, "the greater the guarantee that Georgia will not begin a new war."

23. Finally, bitterness from war with Georgia has prevented others from assuming Georgian citizenship. "I would rather die of hunger than take a Georgian passport," said one man who fought in the Georgia-Abkhazia war. "That would be a betrayal of the memory of my brother, who died in the war." (See doc of ref in appendix).

24. In concert with such statements, Abkhaz leaders have repeatedly asserted that they must never again allow themselves to become a minority, categorically excluding the return of all Georgian IDPs. As in Georgia proper, access to political power for minorities in Abkhazia is limited. Abkhaz are dominant in both the political and business arenas. While he situation of minorities in Abkhazia is far from ideal, inter-ethnic relations between the region's groups are generally stable, with the notable exception of the Georgians.

25. In an address on May 2004, Georgian President Saakashvili stressed that reunification with Abkhazia and South Ossetia would be a priority of his government. Little progress has been made, however, in bilateral negotiations on the future political status of Abkhazia or the return of Georgian IDPs, whose numbers are estimated at around 250,000 by the UNHRC. Restoring Georgian sovereignty over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, it seems, would require significantly improved relations between Tbilisi and Moscow. Given President Saakashvili's distrust of his larger neighbour's intentions, however, this seems unlikely. He has quipped that Russia's surported efforts at peacekeeping in Abkhazia and South Ossetia would more accurately be called "piece-keeping." For some Russians, he says, these breakaway republics represent "the last bastion of the fight for the empire." (See articles from "the economist" and other docs of ref in appendix). In a comment not explicity—but almost certainly—referring to Russia during his annual state of the nation speech to parliament on February 10 of this year, Saakashvili said that Georgia is "a country that has to reclaim the most attractive part of its territory and which faces… perhaps not the strongest but certainly the most aggressive… forces in the world."

26. In line with such suspicions, many speculated about Russian involvement in the recent death of Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania. After investigations, however, the Associated Press detected "no sign of foul play" and the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation ruled out murder as the cause of death.

27. In elections on January 12, Abkhazians chose Bagapsh as their president after months of controversy and stalemate following what analysts have called a “barely concealed attempt by Moscow to block the outcome of an earlier presidential election.” The previous election, which took place on October 3, 2004, had also declared Sergei Bagapsh the winner. The January elections provided for a system of power sharing whereby Khajimba—Bagapsh’s main contender in October elections, generally considered to have been favoured by Russia—is charged with coordinating the region’s foreign, defence and security policies.

28. Bagapsh’s election has changed little in relations between Georgia and its breakaway republics: Saakashvili’s offers of broader autonomy in exchange for central control of the Abkhazia and South Ossetia continue to be rejected.

B. NAGORNO KARABAKH (AZERBAIJAN)

29. The conflict in Nagorno Karabakh—which, in Soviet times, was an autonomous province with predominantly ethnic Armenian composition— dates –for the most recent part- back from 1988. Conflict erupted over Armenian perceptions of ethnic discrimination and the Azerbaijani government’s denial of cultural rights. For more information see this Committees’ general report in 2004 on “Stability in the South Caucasus”.

30. As Minority Rights International reports, “the desire for the region to be transferred from Azerbaijani to Armenian jurisdiction within broader USSR federal arrangements led to escalation of tensions, ethnic conflict and, subsequently, a war between the two states when they acquired independence in 1991… The escalation of inter-ethnic tensions led to the expulsion of 185,000 Azeris and 11,000 Muslim Kurds from Armenia in 1988. 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. In 1991 Karabakh proclaimed independence rather than unification with Armenia.”

31. This “frozen” conflict’s lasting potential for regional destabilization lies in the fact that, while Armenia considers the conflict over, Azerbaijan does not. Karabakh peace talks between Armenian and Azeri presidents gained momentum in early 2001, but have globally stalled since then. The two leaders, while close on many issues, could not make a final agreement. The major obstacle remains entrenched public opinion: many on both sides suspect that their president may betray the ‘national cause’ and give up ‘their’ territory to the enemy.

32. While the official positions of the two presidents seem to be ‘ahead of their populations’ in their understanding of the need for compromise, both governments have pursued policies that complicate the situation. Azerbaijan hosts over 760,000 IDPs and refugees displaced as a result of the conflict. The government tends to keep them in limbo promising return. Some younger people migrated to Russia for work, but many continue to live in tented accommodation.

33. Rather counterproductive have been the allegations on the Armenian government’s policy encouraging Armenian resettlement in areas held by the Armenian forces around Karabakh (‘occupied territories’ or ‘security zone’), which enjoy relative security. Settlers receive state support in renovation of houses, do not pay taxes and much-reduced rates for utilities, while the authorities try to build physical and social infrastructure. As Anna Mateeva warns in a report submitted to the UN Working Group on Minorities, while the settler population is currently small (between 20,000 to 28,000, according to local authorities) “an Israel-type scenario can be easily

envisaged if this process continues, making it even more difficult to reach a 'peace for territories' settlement."

34. Whether this "frozen" conflict will be revived by enthusiasm for war is difficult to determine. While 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.

35. After meeting with Azeri and Armenian officials in April 2005, OSCE Chairman-in-Office Dimitrij Rupel urged both sides to continue attempts to reach a lasting solution to the conflict. Speaking in April of this year, he called for the stabilization of the situation along the frontlines and said that, "to defuse the present tension and start developing confidence between the sides, ceasefire violations must stop." He did not comment on Armenia's settlement policy.

IV. RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

36. The role of religion in the Caucasus has increased in prominence in post-Soviet times. For many, it provided not only a pillar of national identity, but also spiritual guidance and psychological comfort at a time which for many been rife with turmoil and hardship. Socially, it serves to assert and distinguish group identity, and it sometimes used as a political weapon.

Armenia	Armenian Apostolic 94%, other Christian 4%, Yezidi (Zoroastrian/animist) 2%
Azerbaijan	Shia Muslim 93.4%, Russian Orthodox 2.5%, Armenian Orthodox 2.3%, other 1.8% (1995 est.)
Georgia	Georgian Orthodox 65%, Sunni Muslim 11%, Russian Orthodox 10%, Armenian Apostolic 8%, unknown 6%

Source: 2004 CIA Factbook

37. The majority of Armenians (98%) and Georgians (83%) are Christian, whereas most Azeris (94%) are Shi'a Muslims. There are Zoroastrian believers in Azerbaijan as well as Armenia, and all three states have tiny groups of practicing Jews.

A. RELIGION IN PUBLIC LIFE

38. In **all three states**, constitutional provisions enshrine a theoretical separation between church and state. In practice, this separation does not always hold. In **Armenia**, the government grants special status to the Armenian Apostolic Church as the national church of Armenia, and requires all religious bodies to register with the state, although its constitution technically provides for a separation between religion and government. **Azerbaijan**—which has adopted a Turkish secular model of statehood since independence—has increased its monitoring of religion after the creation of a State Committee on Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA).

39. The most striking illustration of the state exercising control over religion in Azerbaijan has been the case Imam Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, the head of the Center for the Protection of Conscience and Religious Freedom, and a government critic. Having been tried for alleged participation in the post-election violence, he was found him guilty and sentenced to five years in prison despite serious allegations that the charges were falsified. While Ibrahimoglu was in custody, a court ordered that the Juma Mosque community—which Ibrahimoglu had led—to be evicted from the mosque it had used since 1992. Worshippers were forcefully evicted from the mosque in June 2004. In the following month, authorities prevented the community from meeting at a private house, raiding the premises and temporarily detaining all twenty-six members present (source Human Right Watch).

40. Authorities based their actions on allegations of Ibrahimoglu's and the community's political activities, whereby Azeri law prohibits a religious organization from directly involving itself in political activities. The Juma Mosque congregation, which registered with the Ministry of Justice in 1993, has refused to re-register with SCWRA, citing concerns that the new process might allow the Government to interfere with its practices.

B. NON-TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS GROUPS

41. In general, however, states tend to respect the existence and practices of minorities who practice other traditional creeds—in **Azerbaijan**, the Russian Orthodox Church is free to function, while Yezidi Kurds in Armenia – whose religion incorporates elements of sun worship, Christianity and Zoroastrianism – and Muslim groups (such as Azeris and Chechens) in Georgia are also free to practice their religion.

42. Non-traditional religious minorities, however, have been subject to systematic harassment and even imprisonment in all three countries. In Shevadnadze's Georgia, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists and Pentecostalists suffered hate speech from violent attacks by right-wing Orthodox Christian vigilantes. Such attacks occurred with the covert support or even cooperation of the local authorities and the police, consequently became more frequent and pervasive. As Amnesty International reports, minorities in Georgia "continued to face harassment, intimidation and violent attacks by supporters of the Georgian Orthodox Church" throughout 2003, while "police failed to provide adequate protection for those targeted." While incidents of intimidation and violence against religious minorities were reported by Human Rights Watch in 2004, after Mikheil Saakashvili took over as president, the numbers were significantly lower than previous years, marking an improvement in the country's environment for freedom of religion.

43. Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses is also a problem in **Armenia**, where it is linked to conscription and the lack of a law on alternative military service. By December 2003, prison sentences for conscientious objection had been imposed on at least 27 men—all Jehovah's Witnesses—while five more had been arrested and were awaiting trial, Amnesty International reported.

44. There was limited improvement for religious freedom in 2004: despite the authorities' promises to release all Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned for refusing to perform military service, the courts continue to impose fresh prison terms. As of September of that year, the Armenian Helsinki Association reported that eight Jehovah's Witnesses were serving prison terms for their refusal to perform military service, and a further eight, five of whom were in custody, were awaiting trial for the same offences. In many instances, such groups have enjoyed protection only as a result of pressure from the international community.

45. While **Azerbaijan** also experienced problems with tolerance of non-traditional religious groups in the past, the situation seems to have improved after a spate of attacks on evangelical Christians in 1999, when President Aliev made a statement committing the country to greater religious freedom. This prompted the authorities' registration of the Jehovah's Witnesses in December 1999.

46. In May 2002, Pope John Paul II travelled to Azerbaijan to plead for religious tolerance around the globe and an end to violence in the name of God. Papal spokesman Navarro-Valls said the purpose of the Pope's visit to Baku was "to nurture a small Catholic community, to recognise a people who suffered under communism, to build more ecumenical bridges with an Orthodox community, and to respond to the hospitality of Muslim hosts."

47. Finally, although there are no state-sponsored policies to expel them, Russian Christian minorities such as Dukhobors and Molokans, are reported to be under increasing local pressure to

emigrate. Both groups—which fled religious persecution in Tsarist Russia and settled in remote areas of the Caucasus—have lodged complaints are that some local groups move into their villages, harassing women and children, while the police do not act.

C. ISLAMIST GROUPS

48. In **Azerbaijan**, both authorities and citizens—most of whom are Muslims—have become increasingly concerned about the rise of radical Islam among the North Caucasian groups, as Islamic movements from Chechnya and Dagestan have begun to spill over into Azerbaijan. As of 2002, about 20,000 Chechens who escaped the fighting in Chechnya were estimated to be living in Azerbaijan. The authorities do not recognize their presence, either by registering them as refugees or by treating them as illegal migrants. Some observers believe the Chechens' presence might encourages the spread of a militant mood.

49. Similar problems have been previously observed in the **Pankissi Valley** in **Georgia**. Radical Islam, or *Wahhabism*, started to penetrate Pankissi during the first war in Chechnya when Kist volunteers came into contact with Islamic fighters and took root as the second war in Chechnya progressed. The valley, which is populated by Kists (8,000 people or 65 %), Georgians (24 %) and Ossetians (11%) is prone to not only to interethnic tensions but also Interconfessional friction, as Kists are traditionally Sunni Muslims, while their neighbours in the surrounding area tend to be Christian.

50. As Anna Matveeva summarizes, the security situation in Pankissi is one of the worst in the Caucasus. The second Russian war in Chechnya led to refugee flows into Pankissi, many hosted by the Kists, with whom they share close ethnic ties. Russia, for its part, has claimed that Chechen and international terrorists penetrated the Pankissi valley disguised as refugees, and that the valley serves as a sanctuary for fighters and a source of arms and ammunition. Georgia denied these allegations until the US State Department articulated similar concerns. In August 2002 Russian warplanes bombed the valley, trying to hit bases of Chechen and Islamist fighters.

V. ETHNIC MINORITIES

51. Shortly after gaining independence from the Soviet Union, a number of ethnic clashes in the South Caucasus region led to damaging civil strife and huge waves of forced migration. Following this turmoil, the governments of the region have taken pains to smooth inter-ethnic relations. They have succeeded—both due to their own efforts as well as to the fact that mass emigration has meant that substantial ethnic and religious diversity has given way to largely mono-ethnic communities and regions—insofar as underlying tensions have not led to full-scale war.

Armenia	Armenian 98%, Yezidi Kurd 1.8% *note:* as of the end of 1993, virtually all Azeris had emigrated from Armenia *Sources: Minority Rights Group International, Kurdish Human Rights Project*
Azerbaijan	Azeri 91%, Lezgins (2.2%), Avars (0.6%) other North Caucasians and Russians (1.8%) *note:* Armenians are concentrated separatist Nagorno-Karabakh region *Source: Minority Rights Group International*
Georgia	Georgian 70.1%, Armenian 8.1%, Russian 6.3%, Azeri 5.7%, Ossetian 3%, Abkhaz 1.8%, other 5% *Source: 2004 CIA Factbook*

52. **Armenia** is the only state in the Caucasus, which is almost mono-ethnic: according to CIA Fact Book an estimated 98% of the population is ethnic Armenian, up from 93% in 1989. The trend towards mono-ethnicity in Armenia was spurred both by the Karabakh conflict with neighbouring Azerbaijan, which led to expulsion of Azeris and Muslim Kurds, and economic hardship, which prompted the emigration of many Russians. The largest minority group, the Yezidi Kurds, is often excluded from policymaking and opportunities to promote their identity.

53. Of **Georgia's** behaviour vis-à-vis ethnic minorities, the Minority Rights Group reports that the country's political culture is "characterized by an exclusive ethnic nationalism so profound that minorities are not accepted as fully-fledged citizens of the country. Nationalism continues to project a climate of 'Georgia for Georgians' where minorities are expected to feel privileged that they are allowed to reside on the territory of the Georgian state. Considerable passion surrounds the issue of whether or not minorities can constitute a legitimate part of the nation, or a group of people defined as Georgians by culture and language should have a pride of place. As the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights noticed in a report, this dilemma remains unresolved, projecting tension and potential conflict."

54. As a result, although Georgia remains the most multiethnic country of the South Caucasus, it has so experienced significant difficulties in creating policies to successfully support its diversity. Senior government 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. Because the government is too weak to pursue a coherent assimilatory or centralizing approach, however, some minorities managed to achieve *de facto* self-rule.

55. 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. There has, however, been no coordinated effort by the state to organize Georgian language courses for minorities. Because new needs of civil integration though language have not been adequately addressed, minorities' isolation from public and political life is increasing. In particular, they find it difficult to access the Georgian state, as federal laws are published solely in Georgian (if officialy translations are produced, they are done so into English) and exams for civil servants are taken in Georgian. Because there is no state support for Georgian or language training, the younger generations tend to speak no language other than their own. If this situation continues, the minorities risk being soon unable to communicate with the rest of the population.

56. Political representation is also an issue, both on national and local levels. Armenians (who constitute approximately 5.7% of Georgia's population) have only six MPs, while Azeris (representing 8.1% of the total Georgian population) have only four MPs in the 235 members Georgian Parliament. As not all of these MPs perfectly understand Georgian, it is unclear how they participate in the parliamentary legislative work. Also problematic has been the government's practice of appointing judges and administrators who speak only Georgian in minority-populated areas. Locals complain that this system leads to unfair treatment and court decisions.

A. MESKHETIAN TURKS (GEORGIA)

57. Having been deported to Central Asia from Samtskhe-Javakheti in what is now Georgia in 1944, and survived pogroms directed against them in Uzbekistan 1989, Meskhetians were resettled in Azerbaijan, the Ukraine, and in Russia. According to the last Soviet census of 1989, there were 207,500 living in the USSR. Current estimates place the Meskhetian population between 270,000 and 320,000.

58. Together with the UNHCR, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) led efforts to move Meskhetians back to Georgia during the 1990s. As a condition for joining the Council of Europe (CoE) in 1999, Georgia committed itself to repatriate the Meskhetians over a twelve-year

period. Due to a history of ethnic clashes with Georgians and Armenians in the period prior to their deportation, Meskhetian repatriation is met with overwhelming local resentment, including threats to resist the return by force. Both regional governments and the national media sympathize with citizens in on the issue, and news coverage similarly echoes such sentiments, claiming that repatriation should never be allowed even if the withdrawal from the CoE is the price for this. Tbilisi 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. (See doc of ref in appendix)

59. As a result, only 650 Meskhetians have succeeded in returning to Georgia. Moreover, Meskhetians were unable to obtain Georgian citizenship between 1994-97. Citizenship began to be granted—on a limited basis—after combined pressure from international organisations.

60. Numbers of Meskhetian willing to return are widely disputed, While Georgian authorities fear that as much as 300,000 Meskhetians would seek to move to Georgia, observers argue that this seems unlikely, given that many have already settled in places where they are, such as Azerbaijan. The Baku Institute of Peace and Democracy estimated that between 90,000 and 110,000 Meskhetian Turks lived in Azerbaijan in 2001, where they enjoy generally favourable state policies and attitudes. Wary of upsetting its relationship with Georgia, Azerbaijan supports the Meskhetian right to return, conditional on its acceptance by the Georgian side.

B. LEZGINS (AZERBAIJAN)

61. Having flared up shortly after independence, tensions between Lezgins and Azeris peaked in 1994, soon after the period of heavy casualties on the Karabakh front and resistance to conscription to the Azeri army. While tensions have receded, Lezgins still fear the assimilation of their culture.

62. Because Lezgins are generally bi- or trilingual, speaking Lezgin, Azeri and Russian, many live in Baku and occupy senior positions in the civil service, army and parliament. For the sake of stability, the Aliev regime has ensured that ethnic minorities (as well as women) are proportionally represented in public positions. The state also provides financial and political support to officially sanctioned minority organizations.

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