

## Armenians

### Profile

Armenians were the largest minority in Georgia prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union; since that time they have declined in both absolute and proportional terms to become Georgia's second largest minority. According to the 2002 national census, there were 248,929 Armenians. There is a substantial Armenian community in Tbilisi, and rural Armenian communities are compactly settled in the southern region of Javakheti bordering on Armenia. There is also a substantial Armenian community in Abkhazia.

### Historical context

Despite sharing a common Christian identity, relations between Georgians and Armenians have historically been tense, largely due to Armenian economic and political domination of Tbilisi and other eastern cities in the nineteenth century. Some Armenians expressed desires for emigration – continuing a trend established already in the Soviet period – due to political tensions in Georgia in the 1990s. In 1990–1991 tensions surfaced regarding land rights as some Georgian nationalist societies were accused of buying up land in areas of Armenian settlement with a view to encouraging more Georgian settlement and changing the local population balance.

Prospects for Armenian–Georgian conflict have been limited, however, due to preoccupation among Armenians with the conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorny Karabakh. The Armenian government has therefore not encouraged any moves towards separatism in Javakheti, although some Armenian political groups in southern Georgia (supported by some political parties in Armenia) have mobilized for territorial autonomy and even secession.

### Current issues

The principal concerns of Armenians in Georgia are the economic revival and integration of the Javakheti region, one of the country's poorest. Districts where Armenians are concentrated – Akhaltsikhe and especially Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda – are characterized by extreme poverty and decline in rural production. The region remains very poorly connected to the rest of Georgia, and the Georgian government has taken very few steps to remedy this situation. This situation is exacerbated by the presence of a Russian military base in Akhalkalaki, which is the local population's main source of employment and subsistence. It is also regarded by the local population as a guarantee against a perceived threat from Turkey. Georgian pressure to remove all Russian military bases from its territory culminated in a bilateral agreement with Russia in 2004 to complete the process of removal by 2008, and the first military hardware was removed from the Akhalkalaki base in May 2005 despite resistance from local Armenians.

In 2004 President Saakashvili became the first Georgian president to visit Akhalkalaki and pledge greater efforts to meet this region's needs. Nonetheless, tensions were experienced in 2004–2006 over attempts to secure Georgian-language tuition and streamline local school curricula with the new national

curriculum. Efforts to reorganize the region's (ethnically Armenian-staffed) police force have also been a source of conflict. Long-standing disputes over the attribution of churches to Armenian or Georgian faiths continue to simmer in both Javakheti and Tbilisi.

International Crisis Group documents that in 2005–2006, ethnic Armenian protests turned violent after clashes with law enforcement agents. In March 2006, the killing of an ethnic Armenian in Tsalka by ethnic Georgian migrants caused protests across Samtskhe-Javakheti. Violent clashes occurred in December 2005, when Akhalkalaki protesters seized the customs house on the Armenian border after ethnic Armenian staff were replaced by ethnic Georgians.

In 2005 and 2006 mass demonstrations and political meetings were organized by Samtskhe-Javakheti activists, whose demands included autonomy within Georgia for Samtskhe-Javakheti and Tsalka Armenians and an end to settlement of ethnic Georgians from other parts of the country in Samtskhe-Javakheti.

Armenians remain sorely underrepresented in central government. In the parliament that sat until 2008, Armenians had five representatives out of 235 seats, or 2.1 per cent of the seats for a population constituting 5.7 per cent of the population. The parliament elected in 2008 only had 150 seats, and Armenians won three of these, for a still-anaemic two-per-cent representation in the body. Legislation passed by the Georgian parliament in July 2007 on the repatriation of Meskhetian Turks has made the Armenian population wary because those settling on former Meskhetian land following that group's 1944 deportation were predominantly Armenian. The new law established a process for the acceptance of Meskhetian resettlement applications beginning in January 2008.

[top](#)