

Samtskhe-Javakheti Region: A Neglected Keypoint for European Security of Energy Supply?*

Utku Yapıcı**

Abstract:

It is no doubt that the rise of new energy actors in post-Soviet geographic space such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan was welcomed by Western power centers. Those emerging actors were assessed as partners in diminishing Europe's energy dependence to a single supplier; the Russian Federation. In this context, the main Western initiatives to challenge Russian energy dominance regarding the Caspian Basin were the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, and South Caucasus gas pipeline. These two strategic pipelines pass through the territories of Samtskhe-Javakheti region of Georgia - a tiny administrative unit adjacent to the Turkish city of Ardahan and Armenian city of Gyumri. Because of that, any political turmoil in that strategic region should easily turn into a factor endangering both already unsatisfactory regional stability and European energy security.

In this article, Samtskhe-Javakheti region's economic and demographic characteristics that make it unique and prone to instability are analyzed and European Union's Samtskhe-Javakheti policy is evaluated through the lens of security of energy supply. The conclusion of the paper is that, the European Union failed to establish influential cooperation mechanisms to avoid political and economic instabilities in this transit region. The European Union simply lacks a comprehensive regional plan compatible with the sociological and economic realities of Samtskhe-Javakheti.

Keywords:

Samtskhe-Javakheti, Energy Security, Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, South-Caucasus Pipeline, Armenians.

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** Assist. Prof. Dr., Adnan Menderes University Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of International Relations, uyapici@adu.edu.tr.

Introduction

Despite recent drops in European energy consumption related to the ongoing economic troubles in the *eurozone*, Europe remains heavily dependent on fuel imports¹. According to 2014 statistics, the European Union's import dependency is considerably high for crude oil (almost 90%), natural gas (66%), solid fuels (42%) and nuclear fuel (40%)². Because of that, the energy security issue - which has gained prominence in European political agenda since the early 2000s³ - is not losing its importance.

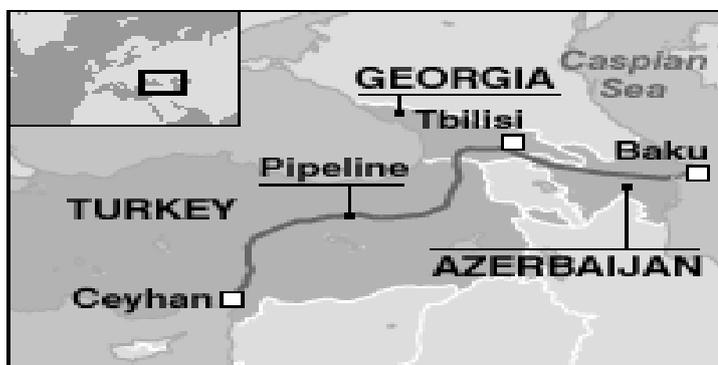
Traditionally speaking, volatile prices and disruptions to supply were assigned as two basic indicators of security of energy supply⁴. In order to contend with those risks, energy-dependent states need alternative energy sources, diversification of their routes⁵, and instrumental mechanisms to avoid political and economic instabilities regarding their suppliers and transit countries. At this point, European Union's strong dependence to an external supplier; the Russian Federation complicates the European security of energy supply issue. According to 2013 statistics, six European Union states' single external supplier of natural gas was the Russian Federation. In 2013, the Russian Federation accounted for 39 % of the European Union's natural gas imports. Similarly, one third of European Union's total crude oil imports were from the Russian Federation⁶. Therefore, as Edward H. Christie points out, the structure of the Euro-Asia energy nexus should best be illustrated by using the word European energy vulnerability⁷.

In this paper, two European initiatives to diminish its energy vulnerability; Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline (BTC) and South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP) are evaluated through a close look at a tiny region of Georgia at the crossroads of the East-West energy corridor: Samtskhe-Javakheti. The paper aims at analyzing the effectiveness and efficiency of the European Union's Samtskhe-Javakheti policy.

Alternative Pipeline Projects Traversing the South Caucasus

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, South Caucasus has gradually increased its importance both as a source of and transit route for hydrocarbons⁸. The unproven, but possible or probable oil/gas reserve statistics show that, Caspian region would constitute nearly 17% of the world oil reserves and 12% of the world gas reserves⁹. Taking into consideration the importance of Caspian's potential reserves, the rise of new energy actors in this energy-abundant region such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan was welcomed in the Western power centers. Those emerging actors were assessed as partners in bypassing Russian energy dominance. However, Russian energy dominance in East-West Energy Corridor has not expired yet thanks to Russia's large reserves and Soviet legacy pipeline infrastructure.

Map 1: BTC



Source: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/4577497.stm>.

The main Western initiative to challenge Russian energy dominance regarding the Caspian Basin was the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline (see. Map 1). Through the pipeline, Caspian oil has been transported from Azerbaijan via Georgia to Turkish port of Ceyhan

in Mediterranean. The 1768 km pipeline, as the greatest private construction project in the world¹⁰, was formally opened in July 2006. The export of Kazakh oil through the pipeline also started in 2013 in addition to the Azeri and Turkmenistan's oil¹¹.

Likewise, a parallel gas pipeline - the 691 km South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP) (see. Map 2) - was opened in the same year. This parallel gas pipeline exports Shah Deniz gas from Azerbaijan to Georgia and Turkey¹². In May 2014, a contract for South Caucasus Pipeline's (SCP) expansion was signed in Azerbaijan¹³. With the construction of Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline Project (TANAP) and Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), it is expected that the transport of Caspian gas supplies from the Shah Deniz Gas Field to Europe will be accomplished in 2020¹⁴.

Map 2: SCP, TANAP and TAP



Source: <http://www.tanap.com/>.

Samtskhe-Javakheti Region's Potential Impediments for European Security of Energy Supply

The two strategic pipelines of the East-West energy corridor – BTC and SCP - pass through the territories of Samtskhe-Javakheti region of Georgia (see. Map 3) - a tiny administrative unit adjacent to the Turkish city of Ardahan and Armenian city of Gyumri. Because of that, any political turmoil in that strategic region should easily turn into a factor endangering both already unsatisfactory regional stability and European energy security.

Samtskhe-Javakheti region (see. Map 4) has interesting demographic, economic and political characteristics that make it unique and prone to instability. Firstly, a minority group – Armenians - constitutes a demographic dominance in the region. However, the Armenians did not have a long history of settlement in the region - it was only in the 19th century that widespread Armenian settlements began. After the Russo-Ottoman War of 1828-1829, the Armenians living mostly in Eastern Anatolia resettled massively to the territories of the Russian Empire, mostly in Yerevan, Akhalsikhe and Akhalkalaki¹⁵. As Voitsekh Guretski points out, on the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution, Armenians constituted an absolute majority in Akhalsikhe (82 %) and a slight majority in Akhalkalaki¹⁶. According to the 2002 Census, a total of 207598 people live in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, out of which 54.6 % are Armenians. In the Samtskhe part of the administrative entity of Samtskhe-Javakheti, Armenians constitute only 20.5% of the entire population. Armenians reach 36.6 % in Akhalsikhe, 17.5 % in Aspindza, 10.1 % in Borjomi and 3.4 % in Adigeni. Correspondingly, in the two Javakheti districts Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda, Armenians reach 94.3 % and 95.8 % respectively¹⁷. It should be noted that, due to the ethnic dominance of Armenians at least in the Javakheti half of the region and the region's proximity to

Armenia, even the tenuous demands of Javakheti Armenians for autonomy or cultural rights eradicate Georgian fears of secession.

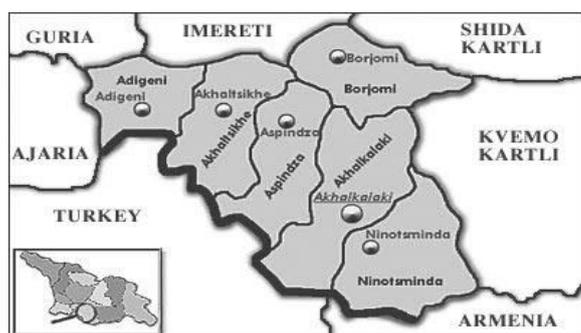
Map 3: Samtskhe-Javakheti Region



Source: <<http://betravel.ge/index.php?hide=gejav&lang=en>>.

Secondly, Samtskhe-Javakheti has always been Georgia's one of the poorest and unintegrated regions. Its underdeveloped infrastructure places it at a disadvantage compared to other regions of Georgia¹⁸. Standards of healthcare in the region are below the Georgian mean and alarming. Likewise, in Samtskhe-Javakheti, the percentage of the applicants pass the United National exams successfully and get enrolled in the universities is lower than in other regions of Georgia¹⁹. On the other hand, this region has always been an agricultural land and suffered from low levels of industrialization. The share of agriculture in regional Gross Domestic Product in Samtskhe-Javakheti was 49 % in 2015²⁰. The most important agricultural products of the region are potato, barley, oats, rye and vegetable²¹. The poor economic conditions and lack of educational opportunities also have pernicious results in direct investments. The leading financial enterprise of the region is Georgia Glass and Mineral Waters Company. However, the company operates in Borjomi, where overwhelming majority of the population are ethnic Georgians, not Armenians²².

Map 4: Districts of Samtskhe-Javakheti Region



Source: <http://www.eurasianet.org/georgia/samtskhe/glance.html>.

Thirdly, the Russian Federation should also be considered as an influential factor in the possible turmoil scenarios regarding Samtskhe-Javakheti. The basic reason behind ongoing Russian influence in the region is simply Russia's military and economic links. Russian military presence in the region - which started in 1848 after the Russian conquest - had been heightened since the inception of the Cold War. The Soviet army and its special services were heavily concentrated in the Akhalkalaki district of the region in the 147th Motor Rifle Division²³. Related to its strategic importance, Javakheti was declared as a closed military zone. Foreigners were barred from entering the area and Soviet citizens needed an official permit to visit Javakheti²⁴. At

Soviet times, the majority of the Samtskhe-Javakheti residents had a strong reliance to the Akhalkalaki military base for security needs, for employment and other social services²⁵. In this context, Jonathan Wheatley rightfully asserts that "...in Javakheti, it was not the Georgian state that provided public goods to the local population but the 62nd Divisional Russian base located in the town of Akhalkalaki..."²⁶.

The Russian Federation formally closed its Akhalkalaki base in 2007 long after the OSCE Istanbul Summit of 1999, when the Georgian and Russian sides came to an agreement on the closure²⁷. However, the detrimental impacts of the closure on regional employment and agriculture sector became a newly emerged destabilizing factor. It should be noted that, Samtskhe-Javakheti's unemployment rates have been considerably high (more than 80%) especially since the closure of the Russian base (62nd Divisional Russian Base)²⁸ and more and more Samtskhe-Javakheti Armenians prefer exploiting seasonal job opportunities in the Russian Federation²⁹. The agriculture sector in the region also suffered from the closure, because the Russian base was the basic market for local agricultural products³⁰. In sum, rising economic discontent following the closure of the base and increasing seasonal labor migration towards the Russian Federation paved the way for sympathy of Javakheti Armenians towards the Russian state³¹. In this context, Russia's decision to stop the flow of energy to Ukraine in 2006 and 2009 winters, the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and contiguous annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation triggered European perception of insecurity in terms of energy.

The Pillars of EU's Policy towards the Region and EU's Effectiveness

Full Support to Georgian Territorial Integrity

As answer to its fears of insecurity in terms of energy, the European Union has continuously implemented a one-dimensional Georgian policy since the official inauguration of the BTC pipeline. The cornerstone of European Union's South Caucasus policy has always been the discourse of maintaining Georgia's territorial integrity. For instance, the European Union remained committed to the policy of non-recognition of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's unilateral declarations of independence³². After the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and relating to the presidential elections held in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the European Union institutions made some declarations reiterating the European Union's full support for sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia³³.

It is without question that the policy of defending Georgian territorial integrity is mandatory to establish regional stability in the East-West Energy Corridor. However, in some instances Tbilisi-centered policy of the European Union resulted in a disguised support for exclusionist nationalist and religious policies of Georgian state authorities. As Tonoyan points out, dominant segments of Georgian nationalism follow Zviad Gamsakhurdia's³⁴ path to define minorities like Armenians as "temporary guests", or "renters"³⁵. In this context, starting from Saakashvili's presidency, identity politics line increased its dominance in Georgian state administration. Saakashvili administration initiated a state program based on promoting Georgian language as the state language for public administration and education³⁶. In parallel with this measure, poor knowledge of Georgian language increasingly became a factor in losing state-paid job opportunities³⁷ or in failing national entry exams for Georgian universities³⁸. Likewise, Armenians have been poorly represented in Georgian parliament, in bureaucratic cadres and Samtskhe-Javakheti's municipalities³⁹. Armenian perception of Saakashvili's policies should clearly be seen in 2009 visit of Saakashvili to Armenia. During his visit, Armenian demonstrators accused Saakashvili of committing a cultural genocide on the Armenians in Javakheti⁴⁰. It should be noted that the European Union did not actively exert pressure on Georgia for the ratification of the European Charter for Minority and Regional Languages that should guarantee Armenian language rights in state services and education⁴¹.

The European Union also did not actively participate in eliminating religious discrimination against minority groups in Georgia. According to Article 9 of the Georgian

constitution, Georgian state announces absolute freedom in religious belief but simultaneously recognizes special importance of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Georgian history⁴². Some privileges such as specific tax exemptions, recognition of the ownership on all the Orthodox churches, exemptions of clergymen from military service, educational exemptions such as voluntary teaching of Orthodox Christianity in the educational establishments, recognition of diplomas, degrees and titles bestowed by church institutions, were granted by the Georgian state⁴³. The status of the Georgian Church as the only spiritual institution that has governmental back caused some protests in the Armenian community⁴⁴. Correspondingly, the Russian Federation became reimagined as a “safe harbor” by increasing number of Javakheti Armenians.

European Union’s Association Agreement with Georgia

Related to Romania’s and Bulgaria’s accession to the European Union, starting from 2007 the European Union increasingly drew attention to the Black Sea region. In this context, apart from its neighborhood policy, the European Union firstly initiated a strategy called “Black Sea Synergy – a New Regional Cooperation Initiative” at a joint meeting of European Union and Black Sea foreign ministers in 2008. Secondly in 2009, at Prague summit, the European Union launched its Eastern Partnership initiative with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia⁴⁵. The European Union-Georgian Association Agreement of June 2014 was signed throughout this background. This agreement brings forth important implications for the Samtskhe-Javakheti region and in the final analysis for the European energy security.

Free Trade Area

The most significant impact of the Association Agreement on Georgia was its determination on economic integration. In this context, Article 22 of the agreement states that: “the parties shall establish a free trade area starting from the entry into force of this Agreement in accordance with the provisions of this Agreement and in conformity with Article XXIV of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade”⁴⁶. On June 27, 2014, Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement was signed between the European Union and Georgia in line with the previous association agreement⁴⁷. It was estimated that, the Free Trade Agreement would bring many economic benefits to Georgia by giving Georgian companies access to the European Union’s single market⁴⁸.

The estimated positive impacts of the free trade agreement were jeopardized with a Russian effort to suspend its free trade agreement with Georgia. In 1994 a free trade regime had been established between the Russian Federation and Georgia following the accession of Georgia to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)⁴⁹. However, despite the establishment of the regime, in 2006 Russia introduced a complete trade embargo on almost all goods made in Georgia after Georgia had arrested six Russian citizens and expelled them from Georgia on espionage charges⁵⁰. Russia lifted the restrictions on Georgian goods in 2013 following the negotiations with newly elected Georgian government led by Georgian Dream Party⁵¹. Ultimately in July 2014, Russia’s Ministry for Economic Development and Trade drafted a decree on suspending the Russian-Georgian Free Trade Agreement of 1994⁵².

In sum, the introduction of a free trade agreement between the European Union and Georgia resulted in Russia’s suspension of its free trade agreement with Georgia. The introduction of the European Union-Georgia Free Trade Agreement and the suspension of the Russia-Georgia agreement would have detrimental results in Samtskhe-Javakheti, depending on the region’s strong trade links with non-EU states such as Armenia and the Russian Federation. Firstly, it is expected that with the implementation of the Association Agreement tougher border control measures would limit already existed illegal export of oil from Georgia to Armenia through Samtskhe-Javakheti. As Overland asserts, the petrol stations in Samtskhe-Javakheti have always been an important tool of the Javakheti Armenians’ informal economy⁵³. Most Javakheti Armenians earned their money through their role as conduits for exporting cheap oil from Azerbaijan to the Armenian market. In other words, hostile relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan after the outbreak of military conflict over Nagorno-Karabagh created an illegal business opportunity for Javakheti Armenians. Correspondingly, tougher border controls would

diminish the illegal trade and create additional financial problems and unemployment risks for Javakheti Armenians⁵⁴. Secondly, up to 20 percent increase in Russian custom duties on products from Georgia is expected following the suspension of the Russia-Georgia free trade regime⁵⁵. The increase in custom duties would have negative impacts on the export of Samtskhe-Javakheti products such as Borjomi mineral water, potatoes and wine.

What is more, Armenia officially joined Russia-led customs union (The Eurasian Economic Union) in January 2015⁵⁶. As Zurab Gogoberidze points out, "...these competing trade bloc loyalties will most likely challenge Georgia's and Armenia's ability to maintain their bilateral economic relations..."⁵⁷. Armenian accession to the Eurasian Economic Union should create additional risks to Samtskhe-Javakheti region's trade relations with Armenia.

Visa Regime

In mid 2000s, apart from its disputed embargo, the Russian Federation launched a visa regime for Georgian citizens including Javakheti residents working seasonally in the Russian Federation. Correspondingly, some Javakheti Armenians worked for retaining Armenian passports in order to break the Russian visa barrier, because the Armenian citizens did not need visas to enter Russia⁵⁸. Some researchers suggest that Moscow is also issuing Russian passports to Javakheti Armenians⁵⁹. Under those circumstances, European Union's Association Agreement with Georgia generated significant ramifications for Samtskhe-Javakheti Armenians' citizenship and visa problems.

According to Article 12 of the Georgian Constitution, a citizen of Georgia shall not at the same time be a citizen of another state except in cases where Georgian citizenship has been granted to a foreign citizen by the President of Georgia⁶⁰. According to Article 32 of the Georgian Law on Citizenship, a person shall lose citizenship of Georgia if he/she adopts the citizenship of another state⁶¹. It should be noted that, despite Georgian constitutional ban on dual citizenship, in practice Georgian authorities had almost always disregarded this constitutional provision. When Georgia started negotiations with the European Union about a visa-free regime, thanks to strict border controls, people who had two passports started to be detected easily and deprived of Georgian citizenship automatically. As a result, most of the Armenians of the Samtskhe-Javakheti region who possessed two passports lost Georgian passports and became aliens in Georgia. Concomitantly, a revision was made in Georgian Law on the Legal Status of Aliens and Stateless Persons in accordance with the European Union legislation in September 2014. According to the new law, a foreigner can continuously stay in Georgia no more than 90 days. Previously, the time period was 360 days. The only way for foreigners to continue to stay in Georgia is to leave the country and obtain new visa because, according to the new law, visas are no longer issued by the Public Service Development Agency of the Ministry of Justice of Georgia. Visas are issued by only the diplomatic representations or consulates of Georgia abroad. This means, every 3 month, Javakheti Armenians who have Russian or Armenian passports have to move to Erivan, acquire new visa and come back to Georgia⁶². Daily life difficulties of Javakheti Armenians should easily become a factor in increasing their alienation from Europe's institutions and in the final analysis diminish Europe's energy security.

Conclusion

In this paper, it is argued that, as answer to its fears of insecurity in terms of energy, the European Union has continuously implemented a one-dimensional and futile Georgian policy since the official inauguration of the BTC pipeline. The cornerstone of European Union's South Caucasus policy has always been the discourse of maintaining Georgia's territorial integrity. It is without question that the policy of defending Georgian territorial integrity is mandatory to establish regional stability in the East-West Energy Corridor. However, in some instances Tbilisi-centered policy of the European Union resulted in a disguised support for exclusionist nationalist policies of Georgian state authorities. Correspondingly, increasing number of Javakheti Armenians started to reimagine the Russian Federation as a "safe harbor". This means, the European Union's

initiatives to maintain its energy security ironically turned into new factors in endangering its energy security.

The European Union managed to get alternative energy sources and successfully accomplished the diversification of their routes; however failed to establish instrumental mechanisms to avoid political and economic instabilities regarding a strategically important transit region: Samtskhe-Javakheti. The European Union simply lacks a comprehensive regional plan related to the sociological and economic realities of that region.

Notes

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