

Armenia Faces Georgian Dilemma

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Yerevan is attempting to stand up for the rights of its minority in Georgia, but is anxious not to fall out with Tbilisi over the issue.

The fate of Georgia's Armenian community is high on the agenda of talks scheduled this week between Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze and his Armenian counterpart Robert Kocharian.

Yerevan has highlighted what it calls discrimination and abuse of the minority community in the run-up to the meeting on October 24, but Georgia is reluctant to even acknowledge there is a problem.

Many Armenians believe that Tbilisi's attitude towards the minority reflects a much wider anti-Armenian bias drawing Georgia into regional political alliances that threaten to isolate their country.

Keen to avoid such isolation Armenia is conducting a double-edged diplomatic game: attacking Georgia for ethnic abuses on the one hand and urging it to remain its steadfast neighbour on the other.

So while prime minister Andranik Margaryan has spoken of Georgia "abusing the basic human rights" of his ethnic kin, his foreign minister, Vartan Oskanian, has been careful to stress that relations between the two countries are the "cornerstone of the region's stability".

The minority issue was thrust to the fore in September at the Council of Europe. Addressing the body, Yerevan parliamentary deputy Armen Rustamian raised concern over the plight of ethnic-Armenians in the southwestern region of Djavakheti of Georgia.

The Armenian community there is said to be enduring extreme economic hardship. Its representatives claim the Georgian authorities have done nothing to alleviate their suffering and accuse them of discrimination.

Rustamian called on European monitors to visit the region and acquaint themselves with the problems there. Georgia's reaction was one of outrage. Presidential aide Aleksei Gerasimov called the speech a pack of lies. In fact, the text itself seems fairly innocuous but the reaction it inspired is a measure of Georgian sensitivity over minority issues.

This is hardly surprising when one considers that in the last ten years Tbilisi has seen Abkhazia and South Ossetia secede, Adjara all but turn autonomous and two border regions effectively declared out of bounds to Georgian security forces.

With Georgia apparently unwilling to address the problems in Djavakheti, the situation there is bound to get worse, especially since Tbilisi is being asked to repatriate Meskhetian Turks, deported from the region by Stalin in 1944, in order to qualify for Council of Europe membership.

The Armenians, who suffered genocide at the hands of the Turks during and after World War One, are opposed to the return of the long exiled community.

Oganes Oganesian, head of the Armenian parliamentary commission for external relations, told the daily Rezonansi that he feared the worst. "I think Georgia has enough problems and this will become another one," he said.

Armenian observers suggest several reasons for Georgian intransigence over the Djavakheti issue. Political analyst Armen Petrosian believes it is in part rooted in Tbilisi's unwarranted belief that Armenia is a Russian puppet, cajoled by Moscow into baiting Georgia.

Others lay the blame with what they see as Georgia's xenophobic attitudes, of name-calling politicians with Armenian roots and censoring programmes dealing with ethnic issues.

At the same time as pushing for a resolution to the minority question, Armenia knows it needs to tread carefully and ensure that it doesn't fall out with its neighbour.

Yerevan is concerned that Georgia is increasing its military cooperation with Turkey. Though this is hardly surprising (since Turkey is a NATO member and Georgia an aspiring member), Tbilisi's simultaneous courting of Azerbaijan, both politically and economically, has fueled Armenian fears of regional isolation.

"We have often stated that military cooperation between Georgia and Turkey is a subject of serious concern for us," said Armenian foreign minister Vardan Oskanyan.

Shevardnadze and Menagarishvili have sought to assuage Yerevan's concerns. But their efforts have not been helped by bellicose noises from the Georgian media and opposition parties, particularly in the wake of Rustamian's Council of Europe speech.

Some of the press have speculated that Russia is trying to stoke up conflict between Armenia and Georgia over Djavakheti.

Increased tensions between the two, the argument goes, would provide a ready made excuse for Moscow to maintain its military base in the region, which local Armenians regard as a guarantor of their security. If the facility remains, Tbilisi would find it impossible to join NATO, which suits Russia down to the ground.

An escalation in tensions, the theory continues, would also benefit Kocharian as he could put the country on a war footing and postpone presidential elections indefinitely.

The Armenian opposition have come out with similar conspiracy theories, which the authorities have denounced as a deliberate provocation aimed at wrecking Shevardnadze's visit.

A foreign ministry representative said the country's opposition, which has been attempting to topple Kocharian's regime for months now, is prepared to damage the relations between the two countries in order to pursue its goal.

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