

## **Georgia: Smuggling Crackdown Hurts Azeris**

Ethnic Azerbaijanis claim that raids by Georgia's financial police are targeting their community unfairly.

Azerbaijanis in southern Georgia are complaining of ethnic discrimination after a series of police raids designed to stop smuggling hit the local economy hard.

Villagers protested in the regional centre Gardabani last week initially about a reduced electricity schedule that gave them only a few hours' power a day. But they then began to complain that they were being discriminated against on ethnic grounds by the Georgian authorities.

"We will carry on protesting and keep on demanding solutions to all our problems," said one protestor, Yashar Orujev, from the village of Vakhtangisi.

"They are acting against Azerbaijanis. The police are stopping our business and calling it smuggling while local Georgians carry on transporting their goods freely," he claimed.

"We don't have any prospects of building a career and getting jobs with the local authorities. There is no gas in our villages, practically no electricity and you can't even turn on the television - there's not enough current."

Azerbaijanis are one of Georgia's biggest national minorities with a population of around 300,000 people. Most live in the east of the country near the border with Azerbaijan and are often isolated from what is going on in society and the rest of the country because few speak Georgian.

This community has now become caught up in one of Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili's major government programmes - an anti-smuggling campaign on all the country's borders designed to boost the state budget.

The interior ministry's financial police raided Vakhtangisi, a village is on the Georgian side of the frontier with Azerbaijan, on January 20 in an operation to confiscate counterfeit goods. However, a fight broke out, and three locals and some policemen were wounded in the ensuing shootout.

The financial police told IWPR that following last summer's closure of the Ergneti market inside the Georgian-Ossetian conflict zone, which had been a major base for customs-free goods, the main smuggling route into Georgia is now from Azerbaijan at Sadakhlo and Krasny Most.

"That is where most of the goods which are sold in Tbilisi and other cities, in markets, supermarkets and even fashionable shops comes from," said Tea Rusikashvili, head of the press office of the financial police.

Rusikashvili, who took part in the anti-smuggling operations in Gardabani region, told IWPR, "We confiscated black market electrical goods worth eight million lari (4.4 million US dollars) from just one family in Gachiani. They opened fire on the police and we had to call up 300 special forces soldiers."

When the police travelled to the next village, Vakhtangisi, Rusikashvili said that they met fierce resistance.

“The police were following a minibus carrying smuggled goods,” she said. “Inside the village the driver vanished but the residents did not let us take the vehicle, they attacked us with stones and Molotov cocktails. One woman spat in my face and pulled my hair. We had to take shelter at the frontier post.”

It was during this episode that the police opened fire and wounded three locals. An investigation is continuing into the incident.

The Azerbaijani villagers complain that the authorities are cutting off their livelihood without giving them any alternative means of earning their living.

“Now apart from all our other problems we’ve been condemned to live in hunger,” said Orujev. “We can’t bring in big cargoes because we have to pay high taxes on them and you can’t earn anything from small cargoes.”

Customs duties in Georgia range from 30 to 35 per cent of the cost of a product.

Rusikashvili told IWPR that corrupt customs officers had exacerbated the situation. “Importing goods worth one million laris, some owners declared it as a cargo worth one thousand lari and did great damage to the state budget,” she said.

“Of course the customs played their part in this. All this business starts on the other side of the Azerbaijani border near Lagodekhi, and three customs officers have been arrested there.”

But local Azerbaijanis are not convinced by these arguments, and say they are the victims of an ethnically motivated campaign to make them feel unwelcome in Georgia.

“Why are [the authorities] always breaking into the houses of Azerbaijanis and punishing only them?” asked Orujev.

“The moment we don’t pay for your electricity, they turn it off. But in the neighbouring villages where Georgians and Svans [related ethnically to Georgians] live they don’t pay either but they get 24-hour power.

“And what can we do now, when they’ve taken away the only means of feeding our families and not offered us anything else? The Georgians don’t want us to live here.”

In another part of eastern Georgia, a land dispute around the Kulari stud farm resulted in the death of one local Azerbaijani woman late last year. That dispute is still unresolved. (See CRS 266, December 16, 2004. “Azeris Angry over Georgia Killing”.)

The local leadership of the Gardabani region strongly denies the charge of ethnic discrimination against the Azerbaijani minority.

“In actual fact the Azerbaijanis live better than the Georgians, you can see that for yourselves and the best proof of that is that Georgians never persecute Azerbaijanis,” said David Nadareishvili, head of the

Gardabani administration.

“We installed gas in two villages at the end of last year and have improved the electricity supply.

“And we have given help to people who suffered during the recent anti-smuggling operation. We paid for their treatment in hospital and medicine.”

But local Azerbaijanis dispute these claims. “Both villages which Nadareishvili is talking about are Georgian,” said Orujev. Relatives of two of the wounded men also told IWPR that they had covered their own medical costs.

Ramilya Alieva is a correspondent for Georgian Public Television in Tbilisi.

**Location:** Georgia  
Azerbaijan

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/georgia-smuggling-crackdown-hurts-azeris>