

Economics

The Role of the Transportation Infrastructure in Overcoming Regional Isolation. Case of Samtskhe-Javakheti

Nino Chkheidze*, Ekaterine Metreveli**

* Georgian International Road Carrier's Association, GIRCA, Tbilisi

** Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, GFSIS, Tbilisi

(Presented by Academy Member Vladimer Papava)

ABSTRACT. The necessity of improvement of the Georgian transportation infrastructure became obvious during the war of August 2008, when due to military actions in Gori and its adjacent territories, the central East-West motorway and the railway were not operable and practically paralyzed the country. The route running through the mountainous Ajaria, Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli (Tsalka) regions was considered as an alternative to the movement of cargo and passenger transportation. At that time it became obvious that this “Southern Axis” was completely unfamiliar and alien to the majority of Georgian citizens. © 2010 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

Key words: Samtskhe-Javakheti, transportation network, Southern Axis.

Introduction. The southern route running to Armenia and Turkey, connects Tbilisi, Kvemo Kartli, Samtskhe-Javakheti, mountainous Ajaria and the Black Sea and represents an alternative to the main arterial highway. Development of the Southern direction with its corresponding infrastructure will have positive implications for the country in terms of diversifying the transportation routes, contributing to regional integration, as well as encouraging socio-economic development of one of the most backward southern regions of Georgia – Samtskhe-Javakheti. Though the need of road rehabilitation in Samtskhe-Javakheti has been on the agenda of the incumbent government, its urgency and necessity becomes even more obvious during the aforementioned war.

In this article we are concerned with the impact of the development of the Southern direction can have on the province of Javakheti. Javakheti, part of a wider Samtskhe-Javakheti region, with the administrative center in Akhalkalaki, consists of two districts (Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki). The population of Javakheti is overwhelmingly ethnic Armenian, comprising around 94 %

in Akhalkalaki and 95 % in Ninotsminda [1]. Javakheti suffers from a legacy of geographic, political and social isolation from the rest of the country, a challenge that has been a matter of concern and hence actions from the central government. Though it is hard to make any specific projections on the amount of turnover or the level of integration of the province due to the nature and complexity of the infrastructural projects and their dependence on political circumstances in general, we shall try to elaborate on possible positive opportunities that the ongoing initiatives for developing the alternative Southern route can bring for Javakheti.

Overview of the Factors Leading to Isolation of Javakheti. The natural isolation of Javakheti due to its location on a high volcanic plateau (1600 – 2000) was further reinforced by the region being a part of 78 km closed border zone with Turkey, NATO member state during the Soviet Union, determining its limited interaction with the rest of the country. Though the restrictions on accessibility were lifted after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian # 62 military base

shaped affairs in Javakheti until its final withdrawal back in 2007. The base was the main provider of jobs in the region, main consumer of local agricultural produce, thus ensuring dependence of the local population [2: 11-12]. The limited civilian infrastructure largely determined the closed character of the region and scarcity of available choices for the local residents.

The ethnic and religious composition of Javakheti has been another factor affecting lack of integration. The Islamization of the region under Ottoman rule from the 16th century was followed by two waves of immigration of ethnic Armenians from the eastern parts of Turkey as a consequence of Russian-Turkish wars. Javakheti has also been a home for Russian religious minorities – Dukhobors who were forcefully sent to the region back in the 19th century [3]. Though many left in the early 90s, around 100 families still remain in Ninotsminda which imparts a peculiar ethnography to the region, turning it into a favorite destination for tourists. The demographic distribution, the lack of knowledge of the Georgian language and resulting informational vacuum draws clear boundaries between Javakheti and the rest of the country, putting on the agenda the need of developing policies aimed at bringing the region closer to the mainstream Georgia.

Additional to and following from the geographic, military-political and ethnic variables, a serious impeding factor of integration of the region has been the poor road infrastructure which made it almost impossible for locals to transport their agricultural produce to the main produce markets and get engaged in trade relations with the rest of the country,

Overview of the Road and Railway Rehabilitation Projects. Against the background of the described situation, a set of initiatives have been put forward by the central government in cooperation with the international community since 2005. The main aim of these initiatives is to encourage integration of the province by addressing the language and information issues and increasing economic opportunities.

A significant component of these initiatives is the road rehabilitation projects carried out in Samtskhe-Javakheti and its adjacent Kvemo Kartli regions to further the process of inclusion into the regional transportation networks. The Georgian government allocated around \$ 25 million for rehabilitation of part of the road connecting Akhaltsikhe to Akhalkalaki, but the main part of the works has been carried out under the \$183, 6 million project of The Millennium Challenge Corporation Samtskhe-Javakheti Road Rehabilitation. The Project aims to rehabilitate over 223.9 km road transport network in

Samtskhe-Javakheti and adjacent Kvemo Kartli region to connect and hence promote communication and trade between the region and Tbilisi as well as with Armenia and Turkey [4]. The completion of the Tbilisi-Ninotsminda road through Kvemo Kartli, Tsalka is anticipated in 2011. It will significantly shorten the time needed to reach Ninotsminda from Tbilisi, downsize the costs associated with travel and is probably one of the most significant achievements of the whole initiative. The project will also rehabilitate the roads connecting Javakheti with Turkey and Armenia, such as the Akhalkalaki-Ninotsminda road including the road to the Armenian border at the border crossing point, and Akhalkalaki-Kartsakhi road to the Turkish border at Kartsakhi. Opening a new customs terminal at Kartsakhi coupled with the Baku-Akhalkalaki-Kars railway project, inaugurated in 2007, is aimed at increasing the opportunities for regional cooperation.

The development of the East-West railway corridor, Baku-Tbilisi-Kars, recognized by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) as one of the top priority projects [5], will link the railway networks of the European Union with those of Turkey, the South Caucasus, Central Asia and China (Vladimer Papava and Eldar Ismailov have introduced a new concept for the Caucasus which is paving the way to an interesting debate over the issue. The authors divide the Caucasus into three regions: the Central Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia), the North Caucasus (some southern autonomous republics of Russia), and the South Caucasus (some northern provinces of Iran and Turkey) [6-8]). The 258 km. long railway line between Akhalkalaki and Baku already exists. Only 95 km line is left to be constructed between Kars and Akhalkalaki (29 km in Georgia and 76 in Turkey). According to preliminary forecasts, the turnover in the East-West railway corridor will reach up to 2 million tonnes within two years and 8-10 million tonnes within the following three years [5].

Thus partial development of the Southern, additional to the East-West functional axis, direction is already observed. Connecting Tbilisi, Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti with the neighboring countries – Armenia and Turkey, as well as with the Black Sea, imparts international importance to the Axis. It should also be mentioned that currently, the feasibility study of building the road between Akhaltsikhe and Batumi is under way. The mentioned road will go through Khulo-Shuakhevi-Keda-Khelvachauri and will link with alternative routes the Black Sea and the southern and southern-western regions of Georgia.

Anticipated changes in the transportation intensity of Samtskhe-Javakheti against the background of infrastructural projects. Significant share of the income of the country comes from provision of transport services, which in 2009 comprised 10.3% and occupied the second place after trade [9] (Table 1).

Table 1

Share of the income of Georgia from provision of transport services

| Sectors of Economy | Total National Product Parts |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Trade | 12.40% |
| Transport and Communication | 10.30% |
| Agriculture | 8.30% |
| Industry | 7.30% |
| Construction | 5.60% |
| Other sectors | 56.10% |

Within the income derived from transport services, Armenia and Azerbaijan occupy an important position. Specifically, more than 90% of cargoes transiting Georgia either through motorway or railway and around 83% of cargoes going through the Georgian ports fall exactly to Azerbaijan and Armenia [10]. Despite that, due to a poor road infrastructure, Samtskhe-Javakheti's share in the transportation income of Georgia has only been around 1% [11: 32]. The same poor road infrastructure was cited as one of the most serious problems facing the region in

the survey conducted by the author in Samtskhe-Javakheti, thus turning the region totally irrelevant for involvement in the regional trade (Table 2).

The development of the "Southern Axis" and rehabilitation of the road infrastructure in Samtskhe-Javakheti with the corresponding increasing accessibility to the border crossing points at Ninotsminda and Kartsakhi will significantly shorten the distance from Armenia to Turkey towards Europe and back. The time needed to travel from Armenia to Georgia or Turkey through Ninotsminda will require less time than through an alternative route [12: 32].

Whether the region will become an alternative to the East-West route for the neighboring countries depends on the quality of the road infrastructure, its reliability, and length of the route. We think it has a potential to turn into an alternative for the Southern Caucasus countries in the direction of the Black Sea, though, it would not be able to substitute totally the main transit category 1 highway, due to the speed and characteristics of this latter (Table 3).

Also, the Southern direction is affected by the seasonal weather conditions and, which is most important, it runs through a difficult terrain. Thus we believe that though the redirection of the cargo traffic will be minor, and the Southern route will be mainly used by tourists or population of the neighboring countries using light vehicles, it will definitely have an enormous positive impact on Samtskhe-Javakheti in view of creating possibilities for the development of

Table 2

Attitudes towards road rehabilitation among the population of Samtskhe-Javakheti, 2009

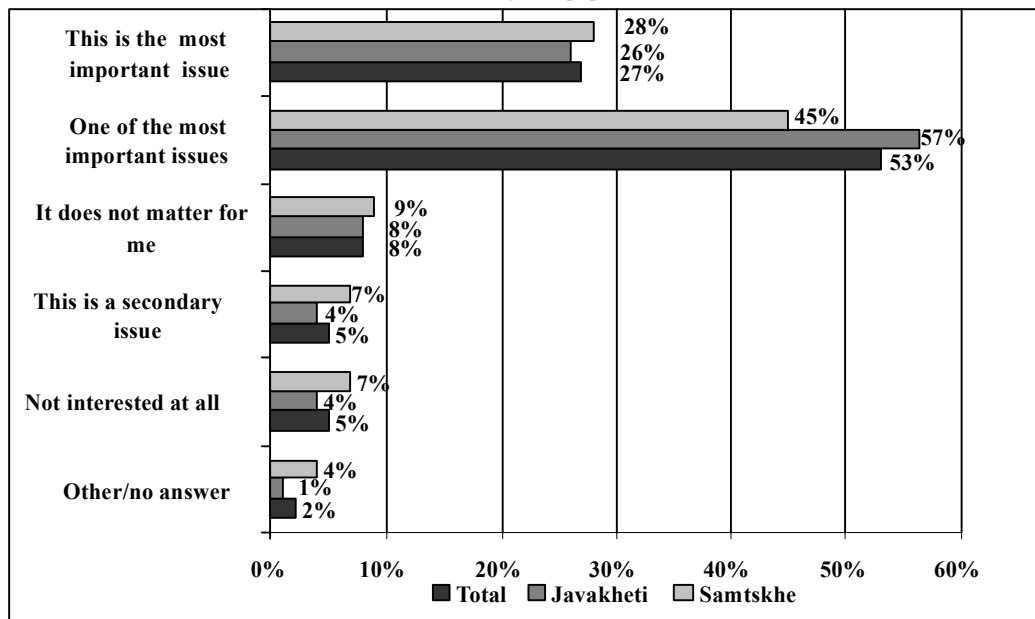


Table 3

Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT) transportation volumes according to classification and points of entry (per day)[13: 26]

| From | To | Passenger Vehicles | | | | Goods Vehicles | | | | Other | | Total | |
|-------------|-------------|--------------------|----------|---------|-----------|----------------|---------|---------|----------|-------|-----|-------|------|
| | | Car 4X4 | Mini bus | Med ium | Large bus | LGV | 2 Axles | 3 Axles | 4+ Axles | M/c | NMT | All | AADT |
| Ninotsminda | Armenian bp | 239 | 58 | 6 | 1 | 70 | 11 | 14 | 28 | 0 | 3 | 430 | 427 |
| Akhaltzikhe | Vale bp | 14 | 19 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 42 | 42 |
| Tbilisi | Lagodekhi | 259 | 13 | 3 | 38 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 15 | 5 | 2 | 337 | 329 |

trade and tourism by making picturesque landscape and historical monuments of Samtskhe-Javakheti easily accessible.

Conclusion. The development of the road and railway infrastructure of the Southern direction will assist Georgia’s integration into the regional transportation networks and will increase its transit function, becoming an additional hub for connecting Central Asia and China with European transportation networks. In addition, it will have an important social-economic and political

significance for the formation of the Southern Axis settlement, directly affecting urbanization of Georgia’s backward southern region of Samtskhe-Javakheti and serious contributor to overcoming Javakheti’s isolation. The inclusion of Javakheti province in the unified transportation network with accompanying infrastructural development will lead to its increased economic opportunities, development of tourism and realization of the potential demographic and natural resources, leading to full integration into the Georgian State.

ეკონომიკა

სატრანსპორტო ინფრასტრუქტურის როლი რეგიონული იზოლაციის დაძლევაში (სამცხე-ჯავახეთის მაგალითზე)

ნ. ჩხეიძე *, ე. მეტრეველი **

* საქართველოს საერთაშორისო გადაზიდვათა ასოციაცია, თბილისი

** საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი, თბილისი

(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის ვ. პაპავას მიერ)

საქართველოს სატრანსპორტო ინფრასტრუქტურის სრულყოფის აუცილებლობა განსაკუთრებით გამოვლინდა 2008 წლის აგვისტოს ომის დროს, როდესაც ცენტრალური აღმოსავლეთ-დასავლეთის საავტომობილო და სარკინიგზო მაგისტრალების გადაჭრამ სამხედრო მოქმედებების გორის ზონაში, ფაქტობრივად გამოიწვია ქვეყნის პარალიზება. დასავლეთიდან სატვირთო და სამგზავრო ტრანსპორტის გადაადგილების ერთ-ერთ ალტერნატიულ ვარიანტად განიხილებოდა ზემო აჭარის, მესხეთ-ჯავახეთის და ქვემო ქართლის (წალკა) რეგიონები; მაშინ აღმოჩნდა, რომ ეს “სამხრეთის მარშრუტი” აბსოლუტურად უცნობი, გაუცხოებული იყო საქართველოს მოქალაქეების უდიდესი ნაწილისთვის.

REFERENCES

1. Major Findings of First General National Population Census of Georgia in 2002, *Statistics Booklet*: State Department for Statistics of Georgia, Tbilisi, 2002
2. E. Metreveli (2004), The Dynamics of “Frozen Tension”. Case of Javakheti. *GFSIS*, Tbilisi.
3. H. Lohm (2006), Dukhobors in Georgia: A Study of the issues of land ownership and inter-ethnic relations in Ninotsminda Rayon (Samtskhe-Javakheti). *ECMI*, Flensburg.
4. Millennium Challenge Georgia Fund. Quarterly Bulletin, October-December 2008; on-line at http://www.mcg.ge/data/file_db/PO%20Bulletin/QB_N17_ENG_gzw-y51A_8.pdf.
5. T. Ziyadov (2006), The Kars-Akhalkalaki Railroad: A Missing Link Between Europe and Asia. *CACI Analyst*, 19 April; on-line at <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/3905>
6. E. Ismailov, V. Papava (2008), A New Concept for the Caucasus. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 8, 3: 283-298;
7. V. Papava (2006), Comparative Advantages of the Central Caucasian Countries: Potential, Realized, and Missed Opportunities: *The Caucasus and Globalization*, 1, 1; on-line at http://www.ca-c.org/book/00.Central_Caucasus.html;
8. E. Ismailov, V. Papava (2006), The Central Caucasus: Essays on Geopolitical Economy. Stockholm.
9. National Statistics Office of Georgia; on-line at http://www.geostat.ge/cms/site_images/files/english/nad/mSp%20mimdinare%20fasebSi.xls
10. Archil Gegeshidze (2007), The Georgian Transit Function. Interview: *Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies*, 16 January, 2007 (in Georgian); on-line at <http://www.gfsis.net/pub/geo/showpub.php?detail=1&id=118>
11. Armenian UNDP Research Team. *Armenia and Georgia Economic Relations: Unrealized Opportunities*. Draft Report (July 2007) from Study of Economic Relations Between Georgia and Armenia: The Development of Regional Trade Growth in Samtskhe-Javakheti, Prepared for UNDP by the *Caucasus Research Resource Centre-Georgia*; on-line at http://undp.org.ge/new/files/24_248_868263_cbc-eng.pdf
12. Study of Economic Relations Between Georgia and Armenia: The Development of Regional Trade Growth in Samtskhe-Javakheti. Prepared for UNDP by the *Caucasus Research Resource Centre-Georgia*; on-line at http://undp.org.ge/new/files/24_248_868263_cbc-eng.pdf
13. Samtskhe-Javakheti Roads Rehabilitation Project, *Final Feasibility Study Report*, Millennium Challenge Georgia Fund, Grant #609, February 2007, conducted by *Kocks Consult GmbH* in association with Designing and Consulting Company BT Ltd; on-line at http://www.mcg.ge/data/file_db/Road%20Project/2007_02_23_S_J_FFS_Report_Eng_DLBvg-_rmY.pdf

Received May, 2010