Does The Survival of the Molokans Depend on Georgia Reuniting with "Greater Russia?"

A recent trip to the Georgian-Azerbaijan border, a potential hotspot due to potential flow of refugees and escaping terrorists from Syria seeking safer havens than a Europe responding to the Paris terrorist attacks, has brought a completely different story to light.

The Molokans are a religious sect. They were booted out of Russia long ago. Now they are saying that the only way they can survive is giving up on Georgia and going back to Russia.

How have we come to this point? And what does it bode for the future of any number of other states?

Home from home from home

The village of Davitiani is located in the Kakheti region, not far from the border town of Logodekhi a few kms from the Azerbijan border. It is now almost empty. The inhabitants are mostly old people, who are joined at the weekends by people visiting from Tbilisi and other regional towns.

Davitiani was once a designated Molokan community, and a thriving one during the Soviet period. Now those still here are of different origins and religious beliefs, including Catholics, mainstream Protestants and miscellaneous Evangelicals. But whatever category you put them into, they live in extreme poverty and see no way out, as many cannot be integrated into Georgian society due to language and cultural differences.

Georgian is only taught at a superficial level in the local school, and there are no more than 20 high school students there and only six in the kindergarten. Most adult residents are functionally unemployed, dependent on subsistence agriculture and spot labour. The old somehow survive on their meagre pensions, but often don’t have enough food.

There is no natural gas supply to this isolated village, so the people rely on wood for heating. A cross section of residents told us that the government does not help them at all, although it makes lots of promises before elections. It did buy a plastic pipe which could help create a new water system, but it has been left lying beside the road for at least a year. They don’t even remember when the regional governor last visited the village.

Obviously the locals would like to get the attention of the government by means of a story, so these are the sorts of things they would be telling journalists. But when they also start saying that their last chance for survival is going back to Russia, alarm bells start ringing. Even in Abkhazia and South Ossetia that is not the majority solution, and outside those regions it is the last idea anyone in Georgia would come out with. When the Molokans claim that Russia cares more about them than their centuries-old adopted motherland does, after they were booted out of Russia for their uncompromising rejection of the Russian Orthodox Church, something is seriously wrong.

Tolerance is not care
Georgia is actually a very tolerant country, despite its own strict adherence to Orthodoxy. It is famous for having a historic Jewish community which is much less recorded than most because it was never persecuted. Although it has failed to provide sufficient facilities for ethnic minorities, and every wave of Georgian nationalism is used by some to abuse non-Georgians, it has a variety of people living unconcernedly within its borders, including plenty of displaced Abkhaz and Ossetians and the Armenian majority in the Javakheti region, who have had the chance to leave to suit other people’s politics but have chosen not to do so.

According to an elderly resident of the village, Maria Khumutova, now 84, the first people who emigrated to Davitiani were Molokans from Russian Armenia. They levelled an elevated plot of land and built single-story wood and clay houses. “My mother used to tell me that the places where we live now were totally empty. In 1905 there was only a big hill here, mostly inhabited by wild animals and mosquitoes. I even remember the surnames of first Molokans who came here. We Molokans are very traditional, devoted and hardworking people. We don’t worship with icons and candles and follow other rules which make us different from other Christians. Their religion is almost same, but we are more spiritual.”

Academic literature, such as Nicholas Breyfogle’s Forging Russia’s Empire in the South Caucasus, presents a similar picture. “They found no religious legitimacy outside the Holy Book, and they derived justification for such a position from Corinthians 3:6 and “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 7:24). They consider Christ to be the only true ruler and don’t accept practices that are common to most Christian religions, especially mainstream ones. For them all humans are equal and must share equally in wealth and never accept the authority of the Tsar as an earthly arbiter, only in secular terms.”

Previously all Molokans lived in Russia. But around 1830 it was decided that they didn’t have the right to stay there, due to their attitude towards the Tsar; they were called heretics and deported to the boundaries of the Empire. Unlike the Armenians, Palestinians and Jews, Molokans do not have a homeland to return to. Most still reside in Russia and Armenia, but the younger generation have emigrated to larger cities and are no longer as attached to the land as their ancestors were. There have never been many Molokans in Georgia, but now there are only 15 Molokan families in this once designated Molokan village.

All in the same boat, but nearer the leak

The problems faced by Davitiani are not necessarily a product of the Molokans’ minority status. They are shared by ethnic Georgian villages too. For example, the name of the village has been changed three times in recent history: from Grafovka to Svobodnoe and now Davitiani, by outsiders who saw the locals as nothing more than political points. Residents joke about this, saying that “If our village had changed at the same rate as its name we would have natural gas by now”.

Maria and others remember how “during the Soviet Union our village had everything. Stalin did everything for us”. Such a statement sounds very strange to the younger generation, but it is undoubtedly true, and was replicated elsewhere in Georgia. There were the tobacco factory, where most people worked, shops, doctors, schools and thriving kindergartens. Many of the students went on to become doctors and other successful professionals. The young people had a beautiful club in the centre of the village, where they got to know each other and sang and danced.

Maria’s pension is only enough for her to survive on. She has children who help her financially, but the same is not true of others. There are children in the village, who need a lot of things, but their parents can’t help them as they have no money.

Georgia has had a negative demographic trend for a number of years. The Patriarch of Georgia is trying to increase the birthrate by becoming the godfather of the third and future children of Orthodox families, but this does not apply to those of other religions.

Maria cannot remember the last wedding which took place in Davitiani. The Molokans used to have special wedding traditions, such as the newlyweds walking through the village and greeting to the people who would step out of their houses to see them. Now the Molokans can’t even hold their prayers. The priest has to be a man, but they could find no man in the village qualified for the job so a woman was appointed. She has just died, and there is no sign of any replacement being made.

It is this factor which is persuading the Molokans that they will be better off back in the once-hated Russia. They see that native Georgians around them suffer in the same way, and are sympathetic. But at least Georgia recognises
them as its own citizens. The Molokans will always be guests, however welcome, no matter how long they live there. When times are hard for everyone, the locals will get the largest share of the tiny cake, and only economic security, associated with the big power to the north, will help minorities survive.

More case studies

When Maria said goodbye to us, she picked all the flowers she had in her garden and gave them to us as a present. Her eyes were shining and she was crying. Then she asked the young Georgian journalist who was acting as a translator to follow her to the backyard of her house and picked the biggest pumpkin for him, saying that this was the symbol of our friendship.

This is also common throughout Georgia. However it is no longer the automatic response to newcomers amongst minorities. Katia, 78, Galia, 75, and Valeri, 62, all look about 10 years older than they are and walk with sticks. They told us they were returning from a prayer meeting. But they were all initially afraid to open up to us about the problems of the village, suspicious of who had sent us and why we were interested in writing about them and their religion.

They told us that, “There is someone filling in for the dead priest now, but we don't know if she will agree to replace her. Some of the few people left are so old they can't physically attend the prayers. Most of the young have left for the big cities in order to find a job. Those with Russian passports have gone there to find work.”

Valeri told us, “I myself have a Russian surname. I am Russian but don't have a passport. I cannot afford to get one and don’t know what I would do if I went there. But I would go there straight away if I could. The local government doesn’t take care of us. They are not interested in what we need. I have heard rumours that they don’t care about us because the village is not attractive to tourists, the road is bad and Russians live here. Can you tell me how else things could be, when no one will develop the infrastructure? Many of the houses are empty, with broken windows, and even the agricultural building are empty. If you see the building in front of the school, the former community centre, you will see that it has no roof.

“We don't feel like we are living in the 21st century. Based on the conditions we live in, you couldn‘t tell which century we are in. I don't want to think that all these things are happening because the majority of us are not Georgians or Orthodox, but I don't know why else the government is not concerned about us”.

Galia also thinks things are so bad that the village might disappear. Unlike Valeri, she doesn't want to leave. “I love Georgia and I love Georgian people. All my relatives live in Russia, they are begging me to join them, but I can’t leave my home. I was originally from Slovenia, but my parents were born here.” However she adds, “It is so sad that we live in the 21st century and still dream about the past, the Soviet Union and Stalin. But we were all happy under him. Many people in this village don't have the money to buy food or visit the doctor, but during the Soviet Union we didn't have such problems.

“Our only income is agriculture. We Molokans are very hardworking people. The harvest was terrible this year because of the hail. My neighbours planted eggplant, and the crop was all destroyed—everybody’s crop. Now our only hope is peanuts. Almost everyone has planted some, but it takes a lot of time and energy to pick up and gather the nuts, and after that you have to dry them. Then you sell 1 kilo for 3 GEL. My family has 500 kilos of nuts, so our income will be 1,500 GEL, but this is not enough, as when winter comes we will have to spend this money on firewood, as there are no gas or heating in the village. This is the way we live. If I were young I would work, but I don't have the strength now. Many people in the village are like me”.

Katia has a Russian passport and is happy to admit she plans to move to Russia. She is old and can’t take care of herself, so she feels she has no choice. “All my children and grandchildren live in Russia. I will join them this year. I have lived here more than half my life, but I won't survive if I stay here much longer. There are very few young people here and the majority of them are interrelated, so my grandchildren couldn’t find wives and start families. Once they moved to Russia they married. Now they have grandchildren.

“The pipe they delivered to the village makes it appear that the government is trying to renovate the dilapidated water supply system. But do you know how long they have been working on it? As far as I can remember, since last year but there is hope, as elections are on the way, and they will try to do something just before them. They will come and say you have to vote for us because we care about you. But in reality they don't care at all.

“I love Georgia, I love the people here, but the government is not as good as the Georgian people deserve. I have a way out because I can go to Russia, but what can the others do? Many of them don't have Russian passports, but
“they aren’t allowed to cross the border with Georgian ones,” Katia explained.

It is hard for local authorities in dealing with long-term residents of Georgia, especially those who see their future with the Russian Federation. It hard for them [the authorities] to comprehend, especially from a religious perspective, how this minority is not happy living in today’s Georgia. But what their plight makes clear is that rural Georgia has chronic economic problems and unstable government continues.

Georgians knew when they broke away from the Soviet Union that they would be pulling the economic rug from under many such minorities, but they were ready to defend their newly independence regardless.

A total of 168 villages in Georgia are almost empty, and in most cases this is because the locals have given up on Georgia, no matter which government is in charge. This is the same border region where Chechens and various other nationalities came and went freely under Mikheil Saakashvili and the United National Movement, with border guards instructed to turn a blind eye.

This practice has engendered the widespread belief that the border villages are “risky places” in which people can be easily lured into anti-state activities, like the terrorism those Chechens were imported for. The present government has promoted this idea itself, but is seemingly indifferent to the reasons why people are deserting the Georgian state.

The basic principle of capitalism is that economic growth and free markets mean general prosperity, while restrictions only benefit a few. We were always told that Communism only benefitted the few and that Western capitalism went hand-in-hand with national independence for the “have-nots”. Now people are not thinking that their cherished independence is worth the cost. That is a threat to all nations, and one which prosperity alone will not resolve.

The answer is for Georgians themselves to stop thinking they are a minority which needs independence to justify its existence. But as their state is built on exactly the opposite principles, it is more likely to fall apart than take its proper place in the world.

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