

Tuesday, June 09, 2009

[Environmental Change and State Security | Setting Priorities Right](#)

On June 5, the Center for Social Sciences (CSS) at Tbilisi State University hosted yet another insightful lecture, this time delivered by [Professor Stephen Jones](#) from Mount Holyoke College.

As the title of the lecture “Environmental Change and Acute Conflict in Georgia” indicates, the discussion evolved around the relationship between the environment and state security. Professor Jones argued that environmental changes, if not addressed timely and properly may trigger ethnic tension. He emphasized that the risk is especially higher in Georgia, where 40-50% of the population lives on the margin, and even a small environmental change in the absence of appropriate infrastructure can lead to major losses in the country.

While the Georgian government recognizes the environmental aspect of human security by signing on to international conventions and treaties on environmental protection, it chooses a rather “hands off” approach when it comes to the implementation. Military spending remains the main priority for the government pushing other issues vital for the state security off the list. Among the issues that are of great importance to Georgian state security but are rather neglected by the government Professor Jones highlighted:

- Demographic decline and the loss of educated young workers;
- Underfunded healthcare;
- Economic hardship;
- Unsolved issues connected with ethnic minorities;
- Democratic deficit – strong president, weak legislative power and opposition.

As an illustration of his argument Professor Jones brought two examples where environmental changes in Georgia have led to lethal results. In 1998 and the following years, thousands of eco-migrants from Adjara and Svaneti were resettled in Tsalka, a multiethnic district in Kvemo Kartli region. The process of resettlement was rather chaotic and it resulted in ethnical clashes between the Greek and Armenian communities of Tsalka and the new settlers.

Another ethnic conflict sprang after the land privatization in Gardabani and Marneuli, two districts mostly populated with ethnic Azerbaijanis. Ethnic Azerbaijanis claimed that the land distribution was done in a non-transparent manner and land was leased to private firms from the capital. Moreover, when the land was leased to the local population, the preference was given to the ethnic Georgians.

Stephen Jones is the foreign Academic Supervisor of CSS International Master's program Transformation in the South Caucasus, which is currently recruiting students from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia for 2009-10 academic year. Visit [CSS web-site](#) for more information on the admissions procedure or the upcoming events.