report

Minority Rights Group

The Situation of Minorities in Tajikistan

Uzbek woman in Tajikistan growing vegetables in a greenhouse.
Credit: Anisa Sabiri

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Minority Rights Group
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The Situation of Minorities in Tajikistan

Executive summary

The situation concerning minority rights in Tajikistan remains challenging. Ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities as well as other vulnerable groups encounter various forms of discrimination and structural barriers that hinder their access to education, healthcare, employment and other spheres of public life. Although many people share the opinion that day-to-day inter-ethnic relations have improved in Tajikistan, structural issues persist.

Major challenges remain, among them a lack of educational opportunities in minority languages, poorly developed curricula and few textbooks in minority languages, outdated programmes for teaching Tajik and the overall limited scope for using minority languages. While Tajikistan's Constitution recognizes Tajik as the state language and Russian as the language of inter-ethnic communication, it guarantees all ethnic groups the right to use their native languages freely. However, the practical implementation of these provisions presents significant challenges, particularly for speakers of smaller minority languages such as Pamiri and Yaghnobi.

Minority communities continuously face socio-economic disparities, which are reflected in persistent challenges in accessing education, employment and economic opportunities. Other examples of discrimination against minorities in Tajikistan include poor healthcare, which is compounded by challenges in physical access to medical facilities for minorities and the disproportionate impacts of Covid-19. A further major obstacle facing minorities is the lack of access to public office positions for minorities, reported to be available only to Tajik candidates. The situation concerning the socio-economic outcomes of minorities is exacerbated by the lack of disaggregated data, which hinders the creation of targeted programmes and strategies.

Religious freedom is not fully ensured. The Tajik state controls religious activities and practices among both Muslim and non-Muslim minorities. While Muslims face rigorous state control in their religious education and practices, non-Muslim minorities encounter barriers when registering their religious organizations. Government bodies will often prosecute organizations that decide to proceed with religious practices informally.

Although minority women have reported experiencing issues similar to those facing Tajik women, they have nevertheless been subjected to intersectional discrimination based on their ethnic identity as well as their gender. Cases of harassment, biased attitudes and lack of access to education are among the biggest challenges facing women from minority communities.

The Lyuli minority continues to face difficulties in accessing education, employment, healthcare and housing. Like European Roma, the Lyuli community in Tajikistan faces discrimination and social exclusion mainly due to their semi-nomadic lifestyle and engrained stereotypes, while relevant institutions remain indifferent to manifestations of intolerance and mistreatment. Girls and women belonging to the community are particularly vulnerable. On the positive side, local initiatives such as the provision of birth certificates to Lyuli children free of charge are reducing the number of persons without identity documents.

In 2022, the Pamiri minority living in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) experienced a security crackdown and severe repression, following a violent suppression of protests leading to a series of clashes between security forces and local community members. Pamiri civil society leaders were detained, and the government imposed restrictions on the community's religious and cultural practices. The GBAO events of 2022 triggered further outward migration, affecting the Pamiri community significantly.

Finally, Afghan refugees experience significant challenges, including restrictions on residence, lack of access to documentation and arbitrary deportations, which negatively affect their well-being.

Introduction

This report is part of the project 'Resilience, inclusivity, support and equality (RISE): leading to a democratic society through empowerment of CSOs in Tajikistan' implemented by Minority Rights Group Europe and local partners with funding by the European Union. It aims to analyse the status of national minorities in Tajikistan and their rights, while also identifying some of the major issues facing them. The report concludes with a set of recommendations addressed to the government, international organizations, human rights advocates and researchers, as well as Tajik stakeholders with the intent to improve the situation related to national minorities in Tajikistan.

Tajikistan is officially home to over 100 different ethnic groups, according to the latest available census of 2010. The 2020 census data has not been made fully available yet and provides limited data on the Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Russian minorities. Thus, as of 2020, the majority in the country are Tajiks who make up 86.1 per cent of the population. The largest ethnic minority are Uzbeks who constitute 11.3 per cent. They speak Uzbek and mostly live in the Sughd region in the north, in the southern Khatlon region as well as in the capital city of Dushanbe. Kyrgyz make up 0.4 per cent and are the second biggest minority. They primarily speak Kyrgyz and mostly occupy districts in Rasht Valley and Murgab in the GBAO. Russians (0.3 per cent) predominantly live in urban centres such as Dushanbe, Khujand and Bokhtar/Kurgan-Tyube (Rizoev 2020). In the southern parts of Tajikistan live Turkmens (0.2 per cent or 15,171), Tatars (0.1 per cent or 6,495) and Arabs (0.1 per cent or 4,184) who also reside in the DRS ('Districts under Republican Subordination') and the northern Sughd region.

Koreans (1,696), Armenians (995), Bashkirs (872), Azerbaijanis (798), Byelorussians (464) and Jews (182) predominantly reside in Dushanbe and other urban centres. The Afghan population increased from 3,675 in 2010 to over 15,000 in 2021, after the Taliban assumed power again in Afghanistan. Most Afghans are primarily refugees and reside in the city of Vahdat and its surroundings as Tajik legislation does not allow refugees to obtain residence in Dushanbe and other urban centres (Statistical Agency of Tajikistan 2010, pages 7-9; Minority Rights Group 2023).

The Lyuli minority (also called Mughat, Jughi, Gypsies and Roma) is estimated at 12,000 people, which is a visible increase from 2010, when the community included around 2,300 members (CERD State Report 2020, page 5). Lyulis live across Tajikistan, and their biggest communities reside in Khatlon region, and in Vose' and Jaloliddin Balkhi districts. The community tends to live separately.

Official data on such marginalized indigenous groups of Tajikistan as Pamiris and Yaghnobis is absent. Yaghnobis constitute around 9,000 people and live in the Yaghnob Valley, Ayni and Kuhistoni Mastchoh districts between the Zarafshan and Gissar mountain ranges. They speak Yaghnobi, a language that is thought to be related to the ancient Sogdian language spoken in Central Asia. In the 1970s, over 4,000 Yaghnobis were subjected to state-commissioned forced resettlement to the Zafarobod district for the sake of cotton production. Most of them returned to their mountainous villages in the 1980s where they have lived since. Currently, Yaghnobis suffer from poor access to healthcare, education and employment opportunities, and inadequate infrastructure (Juma 2019; Bukhari-Zade 2015).

Pamiris living in the GBAO make up around 3 per cent of the country's population or 250,000 people (ADC Memorial Alternative Report 2023, page 3). Officially, the Pamiri minority is categorized as Tajiks, a designation the community itself rejects. Pamiris speak Pamiri languages, and their religion, culture and traditions are a combination of ancient pre-Islamic Zoroastrian beliefs and Isma'ilism, which belongs to the Shi'a branch of Islam. The community continues to face a lack of proper infrastructure, access to good quality healthcare and employment opportunities. The government frequently imposes information blockades on the region. It sees the GBAO as a security concern since the region was a base for the opposition during the Tajik Civil War and is still thought to offer a large mobilization potential. The poverty rate in the GBAO reaches 39 per cent, making it the highest in Tajikistan.

In terms of religious affiliation, the majority of the population in Tajikistan identifies as followers of the Hanafi School of Sunni Islam – over 86 per cent. Around 3-4 per cent belong to the Shi'a branch of Islam and predominantly comprise Isma'ili Pamiris. The remaining 10 per cent includes members of the bigger Orthodox Christian faith along with adherents of smaller communities of evangelical Christians, Roman Catholics, Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutherans, non-denominational Protestants, as well as Baha'is, Buddhists, Zoroastrians and Jews (Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief 2024, page 3).

Methodology

Despite its multi-ethnic population, Tajikistan does not have a comprehensive legal framework aimed at minority rights protection. Neither does the country have a procedure for official recognition of minority status. Instead, relevant legal provisions are spread among legal texts, such as the Law on the State Language.

To better understand the issues faced by minorities in Tajikistan, this report relies on several types of sources. First, it draws on 19 interviews with minority respondents with the following breakdown: two Afghans (one female and one male), one Armenian-Ossetian (female), one Tajik/Bashkir (female), one Bulgarian (female), one Korean (female), five Pamiris (three female and two male), two Russian (one female and one male), one Tatar-Tajik (male), one Ukrainian-Russian and four Uzbeks (two female and two male). In total, 12 female and nine male respondents have been interviewed. The list of interviews also includes a representative of an international organization who worked in the Yaghnob Valley on an infrastructure project. Second, the report utilizes data collected from focus group discussions, in which 23 respondents participated including two Uzbeks (female), one Turkmen (female) and two Lyulis (male).

Finally, the report analyses secondary data including national and international legal texts, state and alternative reports on Tajikistan's human rights commitments related to national minorities, statistical data and media articles.

The report is composed of thematic sections and is structured as follows. It first analyses the national legal framework and discusses national minorities' own awareness of their rights and existing legal norms. The subsequent section focusses on self-identification, self-organization and kin-state relations. The following two sections cover issues linked to language and educational rights. The next section talks about religious freedoms. The section on socio-economic participation includes data on access to employment, public participation and healthcare. The gender section analyses intersectional discrimination facing minority women. Finally, the three standalone sections summarize the challenges experienced by Lyulis, Pamiris and refugees in Tajikistan. The report concludes with a list of sector-specific recommendations.

1 Legislation and Rights Awareness

Since gaining independence, the Republic of Tajikistan has ratified the majority of core human rights treaties. The Tajik Constitution establishes that international legal instruments ratified by Tajikistan are integral to its legal system and shall prevail over national legislation in case there are inconsistencies (Article 10). Tajikistan has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1993), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1993, CEDAW), the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1995), the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1995, CERD), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1999), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1999, ICESCR), and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (2002). Tajikistan's latest noteworthy international commitment is its ratification of the Optional Protocol to CEDAW in 2014.

The Tajik government has not, however, ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities or the Optional Protocol to the ICESCR. The former is essential for sign language users, a linguistic minority in their own right and doubly exposed to violations when they belong to other linguistic minorities. Regardless of Tajikistan's engagement with various international human rights mechanisms, the country has a poor track record of responses to communications from special procedures mandate holders who have raised concerns about human and minority rights breaches. The Tajik state responded to only three communications out of 11 between 2021 and 2024, according to a 2024 report of the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues.

The single regional legal instrument concerning the rights of minority groups is the 1998 Convention on the Guarantee of Rights of Persons Belonging to National Minorities of the Commonwealth of Independent States (the CIS Convention), which Tajikistan ratified in 2001. The CIS Convention defines national minorities as individuals permanently residing in the territory of the state party, who are citizens of that country and differ from the main population by their ethnic origin, language, culture, religion or traditions (Article 1); membership of a national minority is a matter of free and individual choice by the person (Article 2). The CIS Convention provides for civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights and freedoms (Article 3) and for participation in public and state life (Article 5). Although the existence of a regional treaty aimed at minority rights protection is indeed a positive sign, the CIS Convention does not include procedures for the monitoring of its implementation, which makes it difficult to measure its effectiveness.

The legal framework of Tajikistan does not include a specialized body of legislation dedicated to ensuring the implementation of minority rights. Instead, relevant provisions are included in various legal acts. The Tajik Constitution guarantees that the people of Tajikistan are citizens of the country irrespective of their nationality (Article 6), and that everyone is equal before the law and must enjoy equal rights and freedoms regardless of their nationality, race, language, religion, among other identity markers (Article 17). At the same time, the state authorities are allowed to limit any of those rights to maintain the constitutional structure and territorial integrity of the country (Article 14); such limitations, if enacted, could go beyond what is permissible from an international human rights perspective. The Tajik language is the state language, while the Russian language serves as the language of inter-ethnic communication. All people of Tajikistan are granted the right to use their native languages (Article 2) freely. Further, the Constitution establishes that everyone should have the right to freely determine their position towards religion, to profess any religion individually or jointly with others or not to profess any, and to participate in religious customs and ceremonies (Article 26). At the same time, the establishment of religious political parties is prohibited, despite the fact that this can contribute to the protection of religious minorities' rights. Finally, the Constitution lacks a specific provision for the recognition and protection of the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities.

The 1997 Law on Culture establishes that all national and ethnic minorities living in Tajikistan have the right to preserve, develop and protect their cultural identity as well as establish cultural organizations and institutions (Article 6). The Law on Education of 2013 states that Tajik citizens, regardless of their nationality, race, sex, language, religion, political affiliation, and social and property status, are guaranteed the right to education (Article 6) and that national minorities are guaranteed the right to

access general education in their native tongue within the territories where they live (Article 7).

While establishing Tajik as the sole state language (Article 3), the 2009 Law on the State Language provides that all communities in the country have the right to freely use their native languages, 'except for cases stipulated by this Law' and guarantees the creation of conditions for the free use, protection and development of the Pamiri and Yaghnobi languages (Article 4). However, except for Russian, other minority languages are significantly marginalized, not least in the education sector. Finally, as noted by the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues, the 2007 Law on Regulating Traditions, Celebrations and Rituals, the 2008 Law on Public Associations, the 2009 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, the 2011 Law on Parental Responsibility, the 2020 Law on Countering Extremism and the 2021 Law on Combating Terrorism impose significant limitations on civil society and minority organizations, resulting in their activities being banned, with religious minorities especially facing challenges and even being banned.

The most noticeable legal development is the adoption of the Law on Equality and Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination in 2022. This Law was the first of its kind in Tajikistan. It provides an official definition of discrimination, which is seen as distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on real or perceived grounds and one's race, colour, descent, sex, language, religion or belief, national or ethnic origin, among other grounds (Article 1). The Law also establishes the basis for the definition of direct and indirect discrimination as well as harassment, victimization and segregation, and introduces the principle of affirmative action.

Despite noticeable legal developments concerning minority rights in Tajikistan, minority communities appear to express little or no trust in state bodies enforcing such legislation. A 2021 survey by the United Nations Development Programme in Tajikistan revealed that marginalized groups such as national minorities and refugees demonstrated low levels of trust, especially in law enforcement and the justice system (Milatović and Kovač 2021, pages 100-101).

Almost all respondents said that they were unaware of relevant legislation and provisions concerning minority rights. In case respondents made references to the legal framework, this was always concerning language rights - quoting the right to use Russian in public bodies, and to have Uzbek schools and TV programmes. An Uzbek respondent mentioned that they were aware that inciting inter-ethnic hatred was a criminal offence and that everybody was granted freedom of expression and thought that could be exercised in any language. A Russian respondent shared that they did not think that the existing legislation functioned effectively.

> *'Law enforcement officers sometimes were not aware of relevant legal provisions and the right to use Russian when communicating with public bodies.'*
> Russian minority focus group respondent

While Tajikistan's legal framework includes some provisions aimed at safeguarding minority rights, gaps between legislation and its effective implementation still remain. Despite the adoption of the Equality Law, minority groups express distrust in state bodies. The need to implement educational initiatives to raise awareness of minorities about their rights is underscored by the lack of knowledge about relevant legislation among minority groups. Finally, there are concerns about the merely formal nature of the national legislative framework for anti-discrimination and its non-compliance with international standards, which often disproportionately affects minorities and other marginalized groups.

2 Self-identification, Inter-ethnic Relations and Kin-states

2.1 Self-identification

There is no procedure for the official recognition of national minorities established in Tajikistan. In other words, Tajik legislation does not contain definitions and criteria for national or ethnic minorities. The CIS Convention defines national minorities as persons permanently residing on a territory of the State Party, who are citizens of that state, and 'by their ethnic origin, language, culture, religion or traditions differ from the majority population of the State Party' (Article 1). These provisions, however, are not reflected in the national legislation of Tajikistan.

Hence there is no procedure for the direct recognition of national minorities. Rather, the Tajik state employs several methods for their indirect recognition. First is the inclusion or exclusion of a particular minority in the state-commissioned population census. In case a certain national minority group features in the population census, that can imply that the Tajik state does not contest its minority status. However, there are several issues worth noting concerning the population censuses carried out in Tajikistan.

The largest minority communities recorded in the preliminary results of the 2020 population census were Uzbeks (11.3 per cent), Kyrgyz (0.4 per cent), and Russians (0.3 per cent), while other minorities made up 1.9 per cent (Statistical Agency of Tajikistan 2020, page 27). Such minorities as Pamiris or Yaghnobis are absent from the census lists. While Pamiris are continuously refused the right to self-identification (as evidenced by the census and numerous statements by Tajik officials), Yaghnobis have generally not reported that they have been forcefully recognized as Tajiks. Nevertheless, Yaghnobis are absent from the census.

Experts criticized the results of the population census in Tajikistan for its inaccurate reflection of minority group sizes. For instance, the population share of Uzbeks in the 1989 census was 23.5 per cent, 15.3 per cent in 2000, and in 2010 it became 12.2 per cent (Statistical Agency of Tajikistan 2012, page 7). This tangible decline has several explanations. First, during the 2000 and 2010 censuses in Tajikistan, Turkic tribes such as Durmens, Catagans, Kongrats, Lakais and Mings were categorized as separate ethnic groups, even though they are all members of the same Uzbek ethnicity. This was carried out with the intention of numerically decreasing the Uzbek minority while reinforcing the size of Tajiks; moreover, the census did not allow the recording of multiple identities forcing respondents to choose only one identity (Ferrando 2008, pages 494-496). Second, the pragmatic decision by some Uzbeks to record their ethnic identity as Tajik could have had an impact on reducing the number of Uzbeks.

The second method for indirect recognition is recording one's identity when processing ID cards and passports. Older passports of Tajik citizens (also known as 'internal passports') used to contain an ethnicity line. This line was dropped when the new plastic ID cards were introduced. However, when applying for such a card, applicants still must indicate their ethnic affiliation, which can create contentious situations. For instance, Pamiris are recorded as Tajiks, despite their unwillingness to be categorized as such. On the other hand, Lyulis experience the opposite situation and are often encouraged to register as such – both by the authorities and their peers (ADC Memorial Alternative Report 2017, page 3).

When it comes to individual cases of self-identification, the sources of ethnic affiliation for most respondents are language, religious practice, culture and tradition, as well as ethnicity. As discussed further in this report, Russian-speaking minority members such as Armenian, Bulgarian, Tatar, Ukrainian or Bashkir are often misrecognized as ethnic Russians due to their language abilities. On the other hand, some minority members do choose to identify as Russians, quoting a generally positive attitude towards Russians in Tajikistan as a benefit. Such situations are especially frequent among smaller minority communities, e.g., Bulgarians.

> *'Uzbek minority members change their ethnic identity to Tajik in the documents in order to succeed in public office careers.'*
> Uzbek respondents

The situation concerning minority associations is somewhat uneven since different minorities demonstrate varying degrees of institutionalization. For instance, the Russian Federation actively supports Russian minority associations through numerous organizations including

the 'Russian House' and the 'Russian World' initiatives administered via the Russian Embassy in Tajikistan. The Russian Embassy also supports minority organizations considered indigenous to Russia, such as those supporting the Bashkir and Tatar communities.

Other minority organizations do not appear to have such levels of financial and institutional support. For example, both Bulgarian and Uzbek respondents shared that self-organization within their communities happens through family ties and is of an informal nature. Bashkir and Tatar community members also organize informal gatherings, which are mostly attended by the elderly, to celebrate their cultures.

Thus, the main issues concerning the right to free self-identification include forced identification applied to Lyuli community members as well as misrecognition practised towards Pamiris, who are denied recognition according to their ethnic identity. The cases in which minority members actively choose to change their identity suggest that some minority communities are free to practice their right to self-identification. However, such cases can also be seen as indicators that representatives of some minority groups (e.g. Uzbeks), face challenges accessing opportunities and must resort to shifting their ethnic identity to obtain better chances of succeeding economically and politically.

2.2 Inter-ethnic relations

Except for Pamiris, most respondents shared the perception that inter-ethnic relations in Tajikistan have significantly improved. Uzbek respondents mentioned that they do not feel uncomfortable or unsafe when using Uzbek publicly. Russian-speaking minority respondents, including those belonging to the Tatar, Russian, Bashkir, Armenian and Ukrainian communities, noted that they can freely speak Russian and feel accommodated despite their limited knowledge of Tajik. Respondents tend to compare the state of inter-ethnic relations to the periods of the Tajik Civil War (1992-1997), during which ethnic cleavages served as mobilizing factors.

The rising interest among some minority members in their cultures and roots seems to be a trend. For example, an Armenian respondent shared that they started learning about Ossetian and Armenian cultures and incorporating traditional holidays into their lives. They explained how their parents were 'the people of the Soviet generation' and did not emphasize their ethnic identity but rather their ability to speak Russian. The respondent noted that their perception of the Soviet legacy, which they previously saw as beneficial, had changed and now they thought of Soviet rule as linked to chauvinism towards the peoples of Central Asia and the Caucasus. In order to learn about Armenian and Ossetian cultures and languages, the respondent went online.

Similarly, a Bulgarian respondent became interested in their culture and made use of online communities of Bulgarian speakers. They mentioned that Bulgarian peers they met online were very helpful, which they saw as 'a minority identity working in practice.' A Tatar respondent became interested in the Tatar language and culture and started following social media accounts about the Tatar language.

2.3 Kin-state relations

Respondents expressed varied perspectives on their communities' relations with their respective kin-states. For instance, a Bashkir respondent emphasized their Tajik citizenship over any ties to their kin-state. A Bulgarian respondent argued that they felt a strong connection to their ancestral homeland despite not having visited it. Similarly, an Armenian respondent expressed a connection and affinity for Armenian culture and aspired to visit Armenia, while a Korean respondent described the cultural connection that they felt with Korea despite not considering it a kin-state. One out of four Uzbek respondents said that they considered Uzbekistan as their kin-state due to the time they spent in the country, while the other three expressed a lack of connection to Uzbekistan, citing mistreatment of Uzbek refugees during the Tajik Civil War and cultural differences among their reasons. The first Russian respondent initially identified with Russia but later distanced themselves from it, feeling more aligned with Tajikistan, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The second Russian respondent shared that they had never felt a kinship with Russia and chose to distance themselves from Russian initiatives due to personal principles.

Tajikistan's legal framework lacks a formal procedure for recognizing national minorities. Definitions and criteria are absent from national legislation, regardless of the international and regional legal texts the country has ratified. Such indirect methods of recognition as population censuses and ethnicity records on official documents present challenges because of misrepresentation and forced identification. To rectify these, the authorities need to establish clear recognition procedures based on the internationally recognized principles of free self-identification.

3 Language

In line with the Constitution of Tajikistan, Tajik is the state language and Russian is recognized as the language of inter-ethnic communication, while all nations and nationalities are granted the right to use their native languages freely (Article 2). The Law on the State Language establishes that every Tajik citizen is obliged to know the state language (Article 2). Worth noting is that this Law stresses the commitment of the Tajik state to facilitate the free use, protection and development of the Badakhshan (Pamiri) and Yaghnobi languages (Article 4, para. 2). Additionally, in its last state report to the CERD Committee in 2020, the Tajik government stressed that everyone in Tajikistan has the opportunity to use their native language and choose a language of communication, child-rearing, education and expression freely.

Out of the total population of Tajikistan as of 2010, around 7.5 per cent used Tajik as their second language, 30 per cent used Russian, and over 5 per cent used other languages. Russian was used as the second language among 29 per cent of Tajiks, 10 per cent of Uzbeks, 11.4 per cent of Kyrgyz, and 45.3 per cent of Tatars. Tajik was used as the second language by 52.2 per cent of Uzbeks, 30.6 per cent of Russians, 31 per cent of Kyrgyz, and 22.8 per cent of Tatars (Statistical Agency under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, 2010, page 58). Other sources indicated that approximately 68 per cent of the population claimed to have some degree of proficiency in Russian (Buriev 2019).

Proficiency in Tajik is reported as being important for all minorities. Except for one Russian respondent, all other interviewees agreed that all Tajik citizens must know the state language.

Minority members share similarities concerning proficiency in Tajik. First, all respondents admitted to having learned Tajik through informal means, i.e. communicating with peers or at kindergartens. Second, all respondents shared the notion that the existing school programme for teaching Tajik in non-Tajik schools is

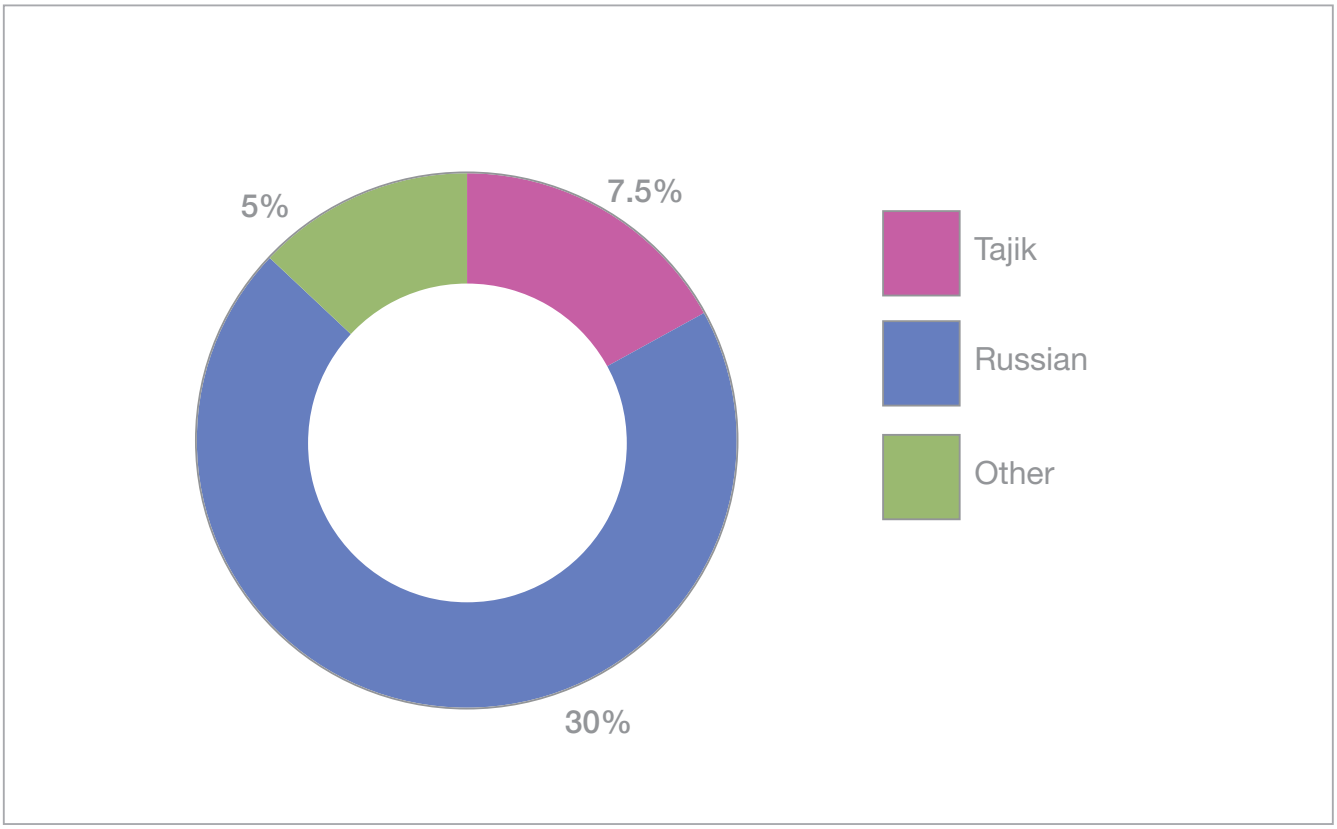

Figure 1: Second language among Tajikistan's population as of the 2010 census

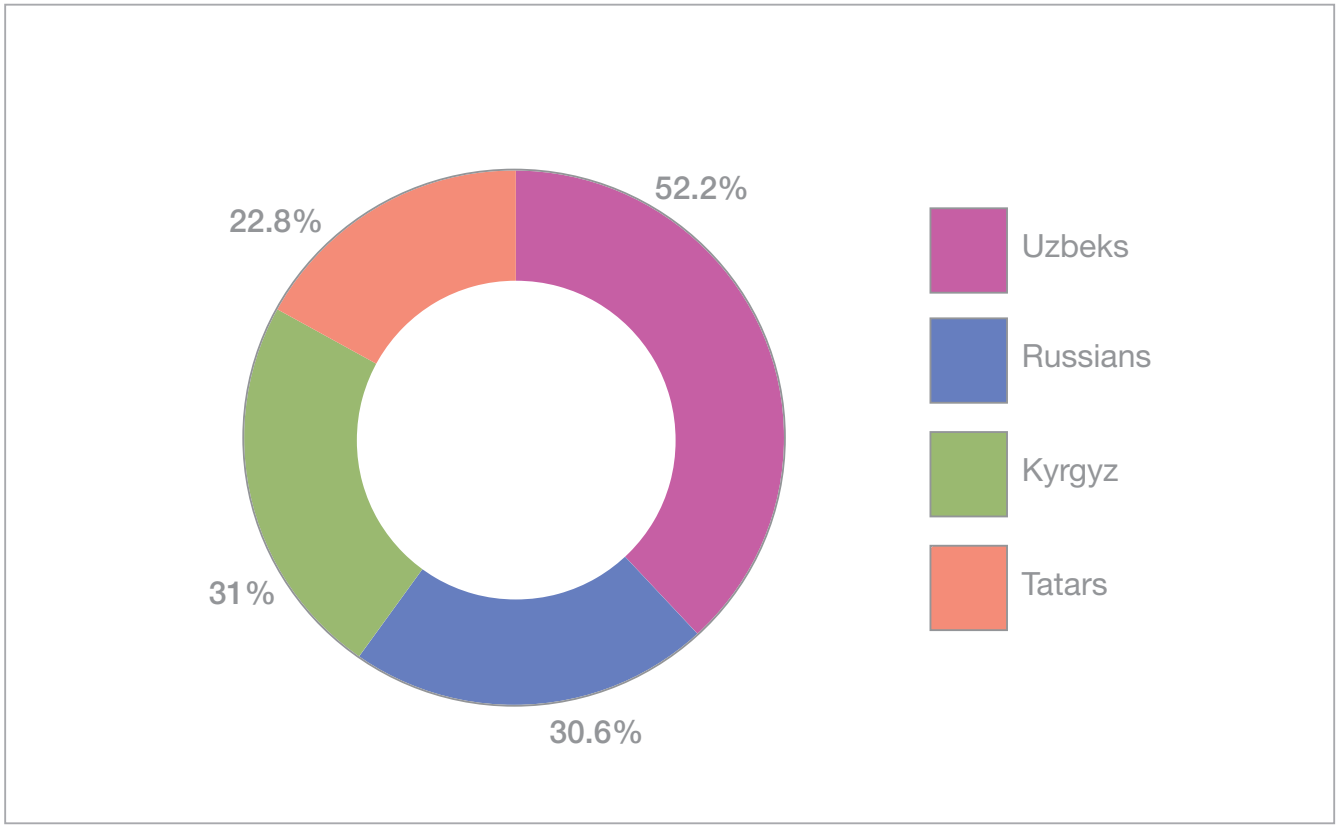

Figure 2: Tajik as the second language as of the 2010 census

insufficient. Tajik language education programmes are seen as outdated, too formal and inadequate for preparing individuals to use Tajik in their daily lives. Third, minority members did not report facing any criticism or persecution for their lack or limited knowledge of Tajik. Bashkir and Uzbek respondents stated that some people occasionally ridiculed their accent in Tajik; however, they did not perceive this as an act of discrimination.

The shared commonality among national minorities that should be mentioned is access to public office employment impeded by the lack of Tajik language knowledge. To some degree, four out of 20 respondents reported that their limited knowledge of Tajik negatively impacted their employment opportunities. For instance, a Bashkir respondent's family member lost their job as a doctor due to their inability to speak Tajik. An Uzbek respondent who also worked as a doctor decided to leave their job after their management introduced Tajik as a working language and after being publicly criticized for their language-related mistakes. The respondent's requests to organize specialized language training for doctors in Tajik did not come to fruition. An Armenian respondent faced a situation in which they were not offered a job for their lack of Tajik language skills, even though the position in question did not require proficiency in Tajik. Russian-speaking respondents said that they were not aware of any of their peers working in state bodies and saw the requirement of Tajik proficiency as a barrier.

3.1 Russian language as an inter-ethnic language

The Russian language enjoys the same level of support and popularity as Tajik. Several causes contribute to the role and status of the Russian language in Tajikistan. First, labour migrants travelling to Russia are required to be proficient in Russian. Numerous Russian language testing centres throughout Tajikistan have been established to meet the growing demand. Second, Tajik citizens are allowed to obtain Russian citizenship, and knowledge of Russian facilitates this procedure. Third, education in Russian is perceived as being of higher quality. For instance, according to a 2019 study of Russian language use in Tajikistan, some 69 per cent of respondents indicated Russian as the desired language of instruction for their children (Buriev 2019). Finally, the Russian Federation supports Russian language initiatives and education through its cultural and language centres. Other minority languages do not enjoy this level of support from kin-states.

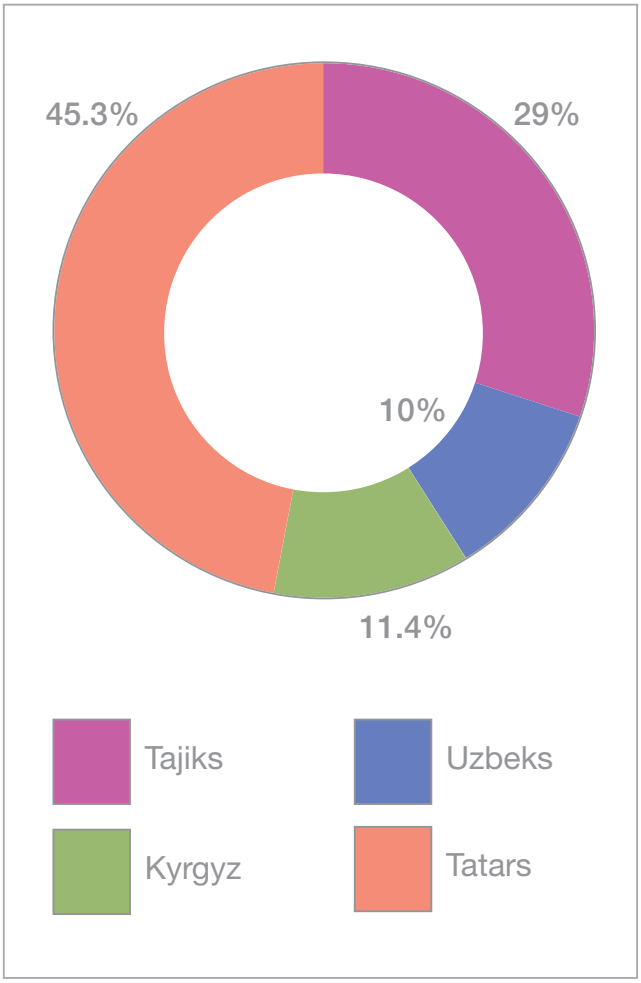

Figure 3: Russian as the second language as of the 2010 census

The Russian language is widely used as a native language among many national minorities, such as Tatars, Bashkirs, Armenians, Koreans, Bulgarians and Russians themselves. Russian is also actively spoken by Tajiks and Uzbeks residing in urban areas. Since members of these communities almost exclusively use Russian, this often leads to situations when they get mistaken for ethnic Russians, regardless of their identity.

As evidenced by Armenian, Bashkir and Bulgarian respondents, use of Russian frequently results in beneficial outcomes. All Russian-speaking respondents agree that the Russian language enjoys a privileged role in Tajikistan. In schools and universities, Russian-speaking students are considered smarter compared to others, according to a Bulgarian respondent.

For Russian-speaking national minorities, knowledge of Russian is considered sufficient for their daily lives. Respondents maintained that they use Russian freely when visiting hospitals, local markets and accessing educational opportunities. Positive examples include the possibility of using translation services offered by public bodies for non-Tajik speakers. For instance, an Armenian respondent mentioned that they were offered translation services when going through a divorce process. Russian speakers also have access to the biggest local media outlets publishing in Russian.

At the same time, command in Russian becomes insufficient when approaching public authorities. As established in the 2016 Law on Appeals, state bodies must provide the answer to an appeal in the state language or in the language in which the appeal is written (Article 17). According to Russian and Tatar respondents, law enforcement agencies, particularly the police, do not communicate with them in Russian. In such situations, Russian speakers must utilize their limited Tajik skills. A Russian minority respondent stressed the lack of Russian language versions of official documents which citizens are required to sign. To navigate public bodies, Russian-speaking minorities often ask their family members or friends to accompany and translate for them. Respondents also shared that although signage is available in Russian in Dushanbe, its availability seems to be decreasing. Additionally, in rural areas of Tajikistan, Russian is virtually absent in public authorities, hospitals and educational settings.

Worth underscoring is the growing perception among some minority communities of the Russian language as a colonial language. For instance, a Russian respondent noted that they do not feel comfortable when Tajik speakers switch to Russian to accommodate them, and this feeling has been reinforced after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. A Bulgarian respondent mentioned that Russian people in Tajikistan 'are treated well and seen as white people', while an Armenian respondent shared that they had started to understand the colonial nature of the former Soviet regime, which had suppressed national identities and languages other than Russian.

3.2 Other larger ethnic minorities / Uzbek and Kyrgyz minorities

All Uzbek respondents said they are proficient in Tajik and would switch to it whenever the need occurred. The main resource for learning the Uzbek language is family. There are Uzbek language schools throughout the country, but their number has been dropping over the last few years (see below the section on Education for details). Two Uzbek minority members out of four shared that they did not know Tajik before they moved to Dushanbe from their home region in Khatlon. One Uzbek respondent mentioned that in their native district, Uzbeks make up the majority of the population and that even local Tajiks speak Uzbek. They also shared that older

Uzbeks are not proficient in Tajik and only know Uzbek. Most Uzbek minority members are also proficient in Russian, which they learned at school and university. However, unlike Russian-speaking minorities, Uzbeks feel more confident when having to use Tajik.

Alongside the high level of proficiency in Tajik language use among Uzbeks, there is also a lack of state support for the Uzbek language. As evidenced by some expert assessments, even bigger minority languages such as Uzbek and Kyrgyz are not used as official languages in the areas where these languages are predominantly spoken. Minority language speakers cannot use their native language to access health or social services or when approaching public bodies. Such a situation is reported to affect the attitudes of parents, who decide in favour of the Tajik language for their children, which ultimately leads them to forego that part of their identity (UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues 2024, page 12).

Availability of Uzbek or Kyrgyz language signs or documents has not been reported, even in the areas where these minorities live compactly and are the majority. Public services are not provided in either Kyrgyz or Uzbek, while state TV channels only offer one-hour news programmes in Uzbek once a week. Print media, in which Russian is ubiquitous, is not available in Uzbek.

Kyrgyz, in turn, is absent from both print media and public broadcasting. Several reports indicate that Kyrgyz living in Isfara in northern Tajikistan routinely switch between Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek languages (Sherov and Kannazarova 2021, page 44; Eurasianet 2022). Similarly, Kyrgyz living in the GBAO can speak Pamiri and Tajik languages. Although multilingual abilities of Kyrgyz minority members is a positive sign and can be seen as a valuable practical resource, their ability to master several languages is the result of social interactions, not government-sponsored language programmes. Moreover, multilingual communication among the Kyrgyz population can also be seen as a direct outcome of insufficient Kyrgyz language opportunities forcing Kyrgyz speakers to switch to Tajik, Uzbek, Pamiri and Russian languages.

3.2 Language preservation

Yaghnobis face challenges concerning the preservation of their language. The Yaghnobi language is considered a direct descendant of the Sogdian language, one of the branches of the Eastern Iranian language. Despite its special protected status under Tajik legislation, Yaghnobi is on the verge of extinction. Some experts report that Yaghnobi is spoken mainly among the elderly population, while younger generations almost exclusively use Tajik. Yaghnobi used to be taught in schools in the early 2000s but is currently absent from the school programme. The Ministry of Education still prints some books and textbooks in Yaghnobi; however, without fully-fledged Yaghnobi classes, it is seen as practically impossible to preserve the Yaghnobi language and foster its use among younger generations (CABAR 2019).

The Yaghnobi and Pamiri languages and their dialects are spoken by small minorities mainly residing in remote mountainous areas of the country. The Yaghnobi language used to be taught at schools during the Soviet era; however, it is currently on the verge of disappearing due to the very small number of speakers and the dominance of the Tajik language. Pamiri languages exist only as oral languages and do not have a codified script.

Tajikistan's legal framework recognizes the right of ethnic minority groups to use their native languages, but the practical implementation of these provisions presents significant challenges. While Tajik and Russian are widely spoken and supported, smaller languages such as Pamiri and Yaghnobi are threatened because of the limited number of speakers and the absence of educational support. Russian still enjoys a privileged status especially benefiting Russian-speaking minorities; however, the use of the Russian language has started raising concerns about colonial legacies. Proficient in Tajik, Uzbek minority members lack institutional support for their language. To address linguistic challenges, the Tajik authorities will need to develop comprehensive strategies that will balance the promotion of the Tajik language and equally foster the preservation of minority languages and their cultural heritage.

4 Education

There is an impressive framework of legislation and policy documents in Tajikistan regulating access to education, including for national minorities. The Law on the State Language prescribes that education shall be carried out in the state language, while educational bodies 'may carry out activities in other languages', as well as guarantees that all nations and nationalities of the country should be freely able to choose the language of instruction (Article 8). The study of the state language in all educational institutions is guaranteed, including foreign secondary general education and higher education professional institutions (Article 9).

The State Programme for Improving the Teaching and Learning of Russian and English in the Republic of Tajikistan stresses that Russian plays the role of an inter-ethnic language in Tajikistan (Chapter 1). It aims to create conditions for improving the teaching and learning of Russian and English languages to foster the country's connections to international communications (Chapter 4, page 13). The Programme for the Mid-term Development of the Republic of Tajikistan for 2016-2020 called for developing and publishing new textbooks in national minority languages, drafting and monitoring a targeted programme for the preservation and development of the culture of national minorities, as well as connecting all schools in the country to the internet (pages 66 and 79).

The National Strategy for the Development of Education aims at providing national minority children with access to study in regular educational institutions to facilitate their integration into mainstream society. It seeks to ensure that the quality of educational infrastructure meets the needs of national minorities, while improving the quality of instruction of the state, English, Russian, and minority languages (pages 41 and 44). The document also commits to expanding the access of national minorities to higher education including through quotas (page 74).

Finally, the key areas of the National Development Strategy of the Republic of Tajikistan include the improvement of mechanisms to increase access to education for girls, women and national minorities (page 52). Among the priorities is the modernization of the system of state support of culture and art, the preservation of cultural and linguistic diversity (page 63), and the development of programmes for the preservation and development of the cultures of national minorities (page 64).

Regardless of the extensive legal framework concerning the education of national minorities, numerous issues remain. Largely, challenges arise due to the insufficient monitoring and evaluation mechanisms necessary to oversee the effective implementation of relevant legislation and policies. This results in a variety of practical challenges. Firstly, although Tajikistan funds over 93 per cent of schools and pre-schools through the national budget and in general allocates some 18.7 per cent of the total state budget for the education sector, such funding is still insufficient (World Bank 2022; Khovar 2023). Salaries for teachers and faculty members remain low due to lack of funding, while the weak school system negatively affects the ability of the higher education bodies to prepare competitive graduates.

Secondly, teaching staff currently consist of specialists predominantly trained during the Soviet era. Once those retire, the body of academic and teaching professionals will be significantly reduced, which will especially affect minority language schools already struggling with the lack of teachers (Asian Development Bank 2015, page 1).

Thirdly, despite the need for education in policies and legislation, only a limited number of schools can offer quality education for minority students. This situation is further exacerbated by the absence of the multilingual teaching in pre-school and basic education that is necessary for minority students to develop the required language skills (CERD Concluding Observations 2023, page 4). Schools that still offer minority language education must rely on out-of-date textbooks. Finally, minority students, children with disabilities and refugee families do not have the necessary means to participate in distance learning, which was introduced amidst the Covid-19 pandemic (Mirzoev 2020, page 16).

According to official data, classes in Tajik, Russian, English, Uzbek, Turkmen and Kyrgyz are taught in general education institutions, which includes three stages: primary school – grades 1-4; secondary education – grades 5-9; and complete secondary education – grades 10-11. Higher education is available in Tajik, Russian and English. As of 2020, out of 3,884 general education establishments, 3,166 use Tajik as the language of instruction (LOI). Some 581 establishments use more than one LOI with the following breakdown: 151 Tajik/Russian; 11 Tajik/Russian/Uzbek; 7 Tajik/Russian/

English; 378 Tajik/Uzbek; 1 Tajik/Uzbek/Kyrgyz; 27 Tajik/Kyrgyz; 5 Tajik/Turkmen; and 1 Tajik/Kyrgyz. Some 127 establishments did not use Tajik as the LOI, including: 32 Russian; 1 Russian/English; 75 Uzbek; 26 Kyrgyz; and 3 English (CERD State Report 2020, page 9).

Among pre-school children, Tajiks accounted in 2020 for 83.3 per cent (125,552 children, including 56,718 girls), Uzbeks for 16.6 per cent (25,040 children, including 11,575 girls) and other nationalities account for 1 per cent (1,304 children; including 594 girls) (the National Strategy for the Development of Education until 2030, page 23).

Finally, participants stated that in such areas as Khatlon and Sughd a coefficient system was in place for final exams, according to which the marks of students from national minorities and rural areas were adjusted to make them comparable to the results of majority students. According to them, this was done in recognition of the challenges minority students face in accessing quality education. Such a system is indeed innovative and can be utilized to boost the performance of minority students; however, no evidence was found in relevant documents to prove its functioning.

Teaching Tajik is considered another challenge affecting minority students' education. A recent media publication showed that there is a lack of possibilities to learn Tajik both for national minorities and Tajiks who grew up in Russian-speaking environments (YOUR.TJ, 2023). Some of the biggest problems faced by linguistic minorities are the outdated Soviet-style teaching of Tajik, the lack of online learning tools and the high cost of private Tajik classes. As discussed in the section on Language, all respondents who did not use Tajik as their first language argued that the Tajik language education which they had received has been inadequate and had not equipped them with the necessary skills.

4.1 Uzbek minority education

The major challenge Uzbek schools and students face is the lack of textbooks in the Uzbek language. Although the Tajik government reported that between 2016 and 2019, over 35,000 textbooks in Uzbek were produced and distributed among Uzbek class students, the number of textbooks in Uzbek schools remains low (CERD 2020a, pages 9-10). Available textbooks are not up to date with regards to modern standards and curricula. As stressed by the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues, most Uzbek textbooks either come from Uzbekistan or date back to Soviet times. Minority teachers, including Uzbeks, are forced to translate state-approved teaching programmes from Tajik into their own languages for which they do not necessarily have the skills (UN Special Rapporteur 2024, page 12).

Uzbek respondents confirm that while they were at school, they used older versions of textbooks sent from Uzbekistan, which still used the Cyrillic alphabet. They noted that Uzbek textbooks were drafted for schoolchildren living in Uzbekistan and contained no information about Tajikistan. Thus, Uzbek schoolchildren would not learn about Tajikistan's history, literature, legislation and culture. Uzbek and Tajik schoolchildren studied according to two separate programmes – Uzbek and Tajik. Once Uzbekistan announced it would switch to the Latin alphabet, its textbooks became no longer accessible to Uzbek minority children living in Tajikistan who studied in Cyrillic.

Later, in the mid-2000s, the Tajik Ministry of Education produced a selection of textbooks in Uzbek, such as mathematics. Additionally, most Uzbek teachers had to undergo training to be able to teach in Tajik.

> *'In primary school, we used only very old textbooks from Uzbekistan that used the Cyrillic alphabet.'*
> Uzbek respondent

Lack of textbooks and teaching staff led to a decrease in Uzbek school provision in Tajikistan. Previously, the drop in numbers of Uzbek schools was seen as the result of strained relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Even after relations between the two countries significantly improved, the number of Uzbek schools in Tajikistan continued to drop.

Data on the number of Uzbek schools varies depending on the source. For example, in 2015 it was reported that there were 900 Uzbek schools in Tajikistan and 487,110 schoolchildren were receiving education in Uzbek. According to the Tajik Ministry of Education and Science, during the 2015-2016 school year, the number of students studying in Uzbek was 205,003 people. Other figures show that if in the 2011-2012 academic year there were 299,494 students in Uzbek schools, there were only 106,083 Uzbek students in 2020-2021. The number of classes featuring Uzbek as the language of instruction in secondary schools has been declining as well: in 2011-2012 there were 14,039 classes, in 2015-2016 there were 9,952 classes and in 2020-2021 the number was 5,178 (CABAR 2021).

According to the Tajik Ministry of Education and Science, one of the reasons why Uzbek classes dropped in numbers was the willingness of Uzbek parents to send their children to Tajik-language schools. The Uzbek association representative maintained that many Uzbek

parents want their children to study in Tajik classes so that they have better chances to continue their education in universities as well as obtain better employment opportunities (CABAR 2021).

At the higher education level, Uzbek education is absent. Some minority students leave for Uzbekistan if they want to study in Uzbek, however, their number is very small – 54 out of 34,065 students studied abroad as of 2020 (Sputnik 2020). Further, the National Testing Centre – a body conducting university entrance exams – administers tests only in Tajik and Russian. Third, Uzbek language courses were not available at universities and other higher education institutions. Recently, in some Tajik universities, Uzbek-language courses opened, but they were available only to foreign students and on a contract basis and local Uzbek students could not apply for those. Finally, for graduates of Uzbek schools, it is challenging to find employment.

There were some positive developments, as shared by focus group participants. For instance, participants noted that there has been an increase in Uzbek language schools and classes in areas such as Zafarobod and Jaloliddin Balkhi districts. They also noted that Tajik students have been travelling to Uzbekistan to study in Uzbek universities, and students from Uzbekistan have been coming to Tajikistan, which has facilitated cross-border educational opportunities. Moreover, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have been constructing schools in each other's territories. For instance, in 2020, Uzbekistan opened a school in Tajikistan's Spitamen region, in which classes are taught in Uzbek and Tajik (Muhammadi 2020).

4.2 Russian minority education

The number of students studying in the Russian and Tajik languages has increased. For example, in 2015-2016 there were 1,501,698 students taking classes in Tajik and 64,194 in Russian. In 2020-2021, these numbers reached 1,887,552 for Tajik and 102,622 for Russian respectively (CABAR 2021). It should be noted that in addition to Russian-speaking students, children from many minority communities attend Russian schools, especially in urban areas. Russian language classes are also taught in all schools regardless of their LOI.

Students in Russian schools are thought to receive a better education since most teachers in such schools are trained using Soviet and Russian methodologies, which is seen as a guarantee of quality. Therefore, education in Russian language is disproportionately popular even among other minority populations. Out of 20 minority respondents, 10 had attended Russian schools. One Uzbek respondent shared that they had studied in Russian, because their parents had decided that Russian schools have better educational programmes and would provide opportunities to continue their education in other post-Soviet countries. Another Uzbek participant explained that they had studied Russian in a Uzbek language school and were under the impression that Uzbek students had a better command of Russian compared to Tajik peers.

Russian-speaking respondents, including members of the Armenian, Bashkir, Bulgarian, Korean and Russian minorities, had attended Russian language schools. Armenian and Bulgarian respondents shared that they had studied in a Russia-sponsored school where they were prevented from speaking any Tajik.

Higher education in Russian, unlike Uzbek or any other minority language, is widely available in higher education institutions. In addition to local Tajik universities offering courses in Russian, there are branches of Russian universities in Tajikistan, including the Moscow State University, which grant Russian diplomas to their graduates.

Despite the fact that Russian education is so prevalent among other minority populations, school exams, university exams or simply driving licence tests are still required in the state language, Tajik.

> *'We were forced to take school exams in Tajik, although my language proficiency in Russian was better.'*
> Uzbek respondent

The respondent also requested to take their driving test in Russian but was refused such an opportunity and was told that only ethnic Russians were allowed to take exams in Russian. Uzbek respondents from the focus group discussions shared similar experiences and noted that Uzbek is absent at the higher education level.

4.3 Kyrgyz minority education

Little data is available about Kyrgyz schools in Tajikistan. According to information from 2012, there were 64 schools in Tajikistan with Kyrgyz-language classes, out of which 37 used the Kyrgyz language for instruction, and 27 were mixed (24.kg 2012). As of 2015, in the Jirgatal district of Tajikistan, there were 59 schools for Kyrgyz students: 22 with Kyrgyz as the LOI and 37 mixed. Kyrgyz students were not equipped with the necessary materials and used outdated and worn-out textbooks since books sent from Kyrgyzstan did not arrive due to bureaucratic procedures (Tag News 2015).

Recent data shows that there are some 53 schools with Kyrgyz as the LOI, providing for around 11,390 students (CABAR 2023). According to the director of one of these Kyrgyz schools, the number of Kyrgyz students has been dropping since the border-related conflicts between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan intensified. Border crossings between the two states remain closed to date thus affecting the performance of Kyrgyz schools. It is reported that some Kyrgyz students who left for Kyrgyzstan for holidays could not return. The number of Kyrgyz teachers has decreased as well (ibid.).

Access to education is particularly challenging for Yaghnobi people. Reports from the region where Yaghnobis live showed that schools offer only 4 years' education, while during Soviet times, students studied for 10 years at local schools. There is only one school in the area that is equipped with modern educational equipment, which also hosts the local medical centre. After the fourth year, parents must take their children to other areas for them to continue their school education – an opportunity not all Yaghnobi parents can afford. In the remaining schools, the Yaghnobi language is not taught (CABAR 2019).

The lack of teachers is especially severe in Yaghnob Valley. Most local teachers have left to work at a boarding school in a neighbouring district. Some parents send their children to study at this boarding school, where students must stay for long periods. This is reported to affect their well-being negatively (Asia-Plus 2023). Due to the limited access to education, many children stop attending school, which jeopardizes their chances of effective socio-economic participation and performance.

A Turkmen focus group participant maintained that Turkmen girls demonstrated a higher education level compared to Tajik girls, suggesting efforts by minority students to excel academically.

In conclusion, Tajikistan has established a comprehensive legal framework aimed at ensuring access to education for national minorities, including the Uzbek, Russian, Kyrgyz and Yaghnobi populations. The state has made significant strides in implementing programmes and policies to facilitate minority education, such as the State Programme for Improving the Teaching and Learning of Russian and English and the National Strategy for the Development of Education. Despite these efforts, numerous challenges persist. Issues such as insufficient funding leading to low teacher salaries, an ageing teaching corps, inadequate textbooks and limited access to quality education for minority students, including those with disabilities and refugee families, continue to hinder progress. While Tajik and Russian are widely taught and used, minority languages face declining usage and limited institutional support, exacerbating concerns about language preservation and cultural identity.

Disparities persist in the availability and quality of education for minorities. Uzbek schools face challenges due to the lack of up-to-date textbooks and trained teachers, leading to a decline in the number of Uzbek-language schools. Similarly, Kyrgyz minority education is hampered by bureaucratic obstacles preventing the timely arrival of textbooks from Kyrgyzstan, exacerbating shortages in educational materials. Likewise, the Yaghnobi population struggles with limited access to education, with only one school equipped with modern facilities and severe shortages of teachers in the region. Despite these challenges, there are glimpses of progress, such as increased cross-border educational opportunities and efforts by minority students to excel academically. Nevertheless, sustained efforts and investments are needed to address systemic issues undermining minority education and ensure equitable access to quality education for all ethnic groups in Tajikistan.

5 Religion

Some 86 per cent of Tajikistan's population identify as followers of the Hanafi School of Sunni Islam; 3-4 per cent practice Isma'ilism, a branch of Shi'a Islam; while the remaining 10 per cent include various Christian communities such as the Orthodox Church, followed by evangelical Christians, Roman Catholics, Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses and Lutherans (Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief 2024, page 3). Additional sources inform about smaller religious communities such as Baha'is (0.05 per cent), Buddhists (0.04 per cent) and Zoroastrians (0.03 per cent) also exist in the country (ARDA 2022).

In line with the Constitution, Tajikistan is a secular state (Article 1). Religious associations are separated from the state and cannot interfere in state affairs, while the beliefs of any religious organization cannot be used either as state ideology or as the foundation for political parties (Article 8). As mentioned above, the Constitution also guarantees freedom of religion to all Tajik citizens (Article 26). Although no religion is given preference at state level, the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations recognizes the 'special role of the Hanafi Branch of Islam' for its 'development of national culture and the spiritual life of the people of Tajikistan' (Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations 2009).

International experts including the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief have stressed that limitations on religious freedom exist in Tajikistan. Such laws as the 2020 Law on Countering Extremism, the 2021 Law on Combatting Terrorism and the 2011 Law on Parental Responsibility provide grounds for the state to interfere in the religious affairs of citizens (UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues 2024, page 7).

Sunni Muslims, who are the majority in the country, face several limitations when practising religion. The State Committee for Religious Affairs and Regulations of Traditions, Ceremonies and Rituals (SCRA) participates in appointing imams to give sermons (Law on Freedom of Conscience 2009, Article 11; Charter of the Committee 2010, Article 5). Women face specific issues such as restricted access to mosques to pray (Fatwa of 2004) and prohibition from wearing headscarves when entering government buildings, hospitals and universities (UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues 2024, pages 11-12). Finally, parents and guardians have the right to epducate their children according to their own attitude to religion, and it is prohibited from involving minors in the activities of religious organizations without written permission from their parents (Law on Freedom of Conscience 2009, Article 4).

All religious organizations must register with the SCRA and submit annual reports on their activities and funding (Law on Freedom of Conscience 2009, Articles 10 and 13). The list of registered organizations as of 2023 included 4,058 religious associations including 66 non-Muslim groups. The registration procedure is reported to be cumbersome, and registration can be revoked by the Supreme Court (UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues 2024, page 11).

Yaghnobis do not have access to facilities to perform collective prayers. As informed by locals, no mosque in the area can accommodate people for Friday or celebration prayers during Ramadan (Juma 2019). Isma'ilis, predominantly represented by Pamiris, have been facing government repression for their religious activities (see below for more detail).

Christian religious minorities face various challenges in Tajikistan. Particularly challenging is the situation for Jehovah's Witnesses. Following the decision of the Supreme Court, the community was banned in Tajikistan in 2007, reportedly for its members' refusal to perform military service (UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues 2024, page 16). Since then, Jehovah's Witnesses have been trying to re-register their organization but to no avail, as a liquidated religious association may not register under another name (Law on Freedom of Conscience 2009, Article 32). Reports by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom indicate that members of the Jehovah's Witnesses face harassment and detention and are often regarded as belonging to an 'extremist organisation'. Recent examples include the case of Shamil Khakimov, who is a Jehovah's Witness imprisoned since 2019 for 'provoking religious hatred'. Khakimov, a reportedly non-violent 71-year-old, has been targeted for sharing his faith in public and was only released in 2023 after serving his full sentence, while not having access to medical care during his imprisonment (Blum 2023, pages 4-5).

The Russian Orthodox Church reportedly does not face repression mostly because its followers do not proselytize as well as on account of its connections to

Russia. Protestants experience difficulties when trying to register their organizations, and as of 2023, some 20 Protestant groups were waiting for their registration to be approved and were carrying out their activities in secret (Blum 2023, pages 4-5). This information, however, was not confirmed by the representatives of the SCRA (Radio Ozodi 2023). Non-Muslim religious community representatives confirmed that they have been forced to fill out questionnaires and provide personal and financial information about themselves and their family members (Bayram 2022).

Respondents for this report did not mention any major difficulties concerning their religious identity (except for Pamiris). An Armenian respondent who is Catholic shared that they do not face any obstacles when practising their religion. A Russian respondent did not report any major issues concerning their religious practices. Small communities such as Koreans and Bulgarians perform their religious rituals privately, and their members did not mention any obstacles. As described by a respondent, the Korean community does not face major challenges when carrying out religious activities and celebrations, after having procured the necessary state permit.

Both Muslim and non-Muslim believers face challenges in Tajikistan. Followers of the Hanafi school of Islam are subjected to extensive state regulation aimed at curbing Muslims from joining extremist organizations. The state holds a monopoly on religious education and appoints Muslim clerics. Christian groups face challenges associated with the registration of their organizations and suffer from arbitrary bureaucratic processes. Some groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses who were banned by a decision of the Supreme Court are refused state registration, while their members face persecution, arbitrary detention and imprisonment. On the other hand, respondents stated that they did not experience major issues when practising their religion as long as they complied with state requirements.

6 Socio-Economic Participation

Lack of data on minority communities' access to employment, public participation and economic opportunities is one of the major issues in Tajikistan and Central Asia in general. It appears to be a difficult task to assess minorities' economic well-being as well as their level of participation in public life. This section draws from the existing official and alternative sources as well as interviews with minority respondents to analyse the major challenges minorities face regarding socio-economic participation and representation.

When discussing public sector employment, most of the respondents shared the perception that this was mainly available to Tajiks. One Uzbek respondent expressed a belief that Uzbeks would not be hired by a state entity due to their ethnicity. Another Uzbek respondent maintained that their friend changed their identity from Uzbek to Tajik in order to succeed in a public position. A female participant in a focus group discussion from a mixed Tajik-Uzbek family argued that she was appointed as school director but had to resign because of the hostility with which she was met given her ethnic identity. Later, she had to change her identity to Tajik in her documents to avoid further discrimination when accessing the labour market.

Another Uzbek participant who used to work as a doctor spoke of how they were not offered a research position at a university and that Tajiks were given preference over Uzbek candidates. They also described how their spouse, who also worked as a doctor, was demoted so that a Tajik person could take their position. An Uzbek respondent from the Khatlon region informed that there were both Uzbek and Tajik candidates appointed for public office positions. They also shared that since the new Tajik ID cards were introduced, it had become easier for Uzbeks to obtain employment opportunities with state bodies. At the same time, three out of four Uzbek candidates informed that they had never faced cases of discrimination and mistreatment at their workplaces because of their ethnic identity.

A Russian respondent had no interest in working in the public sector but said that they were aware of the inaccessibility of such opportunities to Russians. They believed that even if employed, they would not be given the same possibilities. At the same time, Russians are more successful in the commercial sphere, where the respondent felt that their achievements are more widely recognized. A Ukrainian respondent stated that some minority members would not be able to hold government positions and work in law enforcement agencies, mainly due to their double Tajik-Russian citizenship. It can indeed be the case since Tajik citizens are allowed to have a second, Russian citizenship, and many Tajiks as well as minority members are citizens of both Tajikistan and the Russian Federation.

A Bashkir respondent reported that their relative, who used to work as a doctor, had to leave their job due to their inability to speak Tajik. According to a Tatar respondent, the major issue concerning public sector employment is related to the lack of transparency and shared the assumption that the presence of minority members would not have a substantial impact on their communities' status.

Official sources indicate that Tajiks are indeed dominant in the public sector. As of 2020, Tajiks accounted for 92.7 per cent of all civil servants, while Russians, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz and other ethnic minorities represented 7.2 per cent. Tajiks were also dominant in decision-making positions in public institutions – 93.5 per cent; the combination of Uzbeks, Russians, Kyrgyz and other minorities reaches only 4.5 per cent. Information on the share of Pamiri, Yaghnobi, Roma, Korean and Tatar minorities is absent (CERD State Report 2020, page 4).

There is a perception among minority respondents of existing disparities related to socio-economic participation. According to a Ukrainian respondent, 'the titular nation has much wider socio-economic opportunities.' They explained that this is due to members of the Tajik majority sharing broader family and friendship ties as well as a sense of localism, which seems to be playing an important role in the Tajik society.

Among Kyrgyz minority members, there is heightened anxiety and fear caused by challenges in accessing food, medical assistance and other necessities which have worsened due to the 2021 border tensions between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Eurasianet 2022). Local Kyrgyz people reported increased migration after the border tensions – thus, only in 2021 over 800 Kyrgyz left Tajikistan for Kyrgyzstan. Such traditional crafts as carpet weaving popular among Kyrgyz in the northern parts of Tajikistan are in decline due to the lack of demand, the introduction of industrial carpets and the emigration of craftspeople (Sharipov 2023).

The Yaghnobi minority is particularly affected by socio-economic disparities. They experience a range of issues linked to poor quality healthcare, and lack of access to educational and employment opportunities, as well as inadequate infrastructure in the areas where they live. There is a scarcity of medical facilities and personnel in Yaghnobi villages, which contributes to the health disparities faced by Yaghnobis. Available hospitals are far removed and access to those is challenging because of inadequate road networks. Women must deliver children at home, and locals mainly rely on traditional medicine due to the absence of medical facilities. Poorly developed roads also hinder the access for Yaghnobis to economic opportunities. The lack of electricity and clean water are other acute challenges, too. Finally, there are very few employment opportunities available to Yaghnobis in their native mountainous region. Locals predominantly rely on agriculture and animal husbandry for their livelihoods. The lack of employment options contributes further to poverty and economic instability among the Yaghnobi population which, in turn, exacerbates their overall socio-economic marginalization (Juma 2019; Khamidulina 2023).

Covid-19 disproportionately affected minority communities in Tajikistan. In some districts of Khatlon and Sughd regions, minorities faced challenges in accessing medical care during the pandemic. Out of 300 minority respondents surveyed by a local Tajik NGO, including Uzbeks, Kyrgyz and Turkmen, over 50 per cent experienced difficulties because the medical facility was hard to reach; 22 per cent - due to lack of medical specialists; 17.5 per cent - due to the high costs of medical services; and 14.3 per cent - because of high costs of medication. Over 25 per cent of respondents maintained that the main barrier to vaccinating against Covid-19 was the inaccessibility of the vaccine to ordinary citizens (Sharifova 2021).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Pamiri minority organized multiple fundraising campaigns and provided local hospitals with the necessary equipment. Volunteer groups actively cooperated with the local administration and supplied flour in the GBAO by concluding bilateral agreements with producers in Kazakhstan and Belarus and facilitating its import via Tajik border crossings (Berdiqulov et al. 2021).

Despite the limited data on minority socio-economic participation and performance, existing data, including official sources, confirm the dominance of Tajiks in public office. Tajik language proficiency, ethnic identity and lack of family and friendship networks are among the impediments restricting minorities from obtaining employment opportunities in public institutions. Such cases reflect broader ethnic inequalities in Tajikistan. Yaghnobi people experience socio-economic hurdles including inadequate healthcare, education, employment and infrastructure. Addressing socio-economic disparities is particularly important as equal opportunities directly contribute to social cohesion and conflict prevention.

7 Intersectional Discrimination

Minority women in Tajikistan face multifaceted discrimination. Despite cultural and ethnic differences, women from various minority backgrounds share similar experiences, especially concerning discrimination and harassment. However, there is little information available on gender-related issues facing minority women. At the same time, as evidenced by a multitude of expert analyses and reports, structural inequalities are challenging women's access in general to education, equal pay, employment, public participation and safeguards against various forms of violence. Therefore, it is safe to assume that such challenges face women with minority backgrounds as well.

Access to education in Tajikistan is reportedly becoming more equal. For instance, as of the 2018-2019 academic year, girls constituted 48.5 per cent versus 51.5 per cent of boys in grades 1-4; 48.3 per cent versus 51.5 per cent in grades 5-9; and 46.5 per cent versus 53.5 per cent in grades 10-11 respectively. Around 56 per cent of women in Tajikistan obtained a secondary education qualification or higher, within which women from Pamir represent the highest share – 84 per cent. At the same time, female students traditionally focus on education, health care and cultural studies, which are considered low-paid sectors (World Bank 2021, pages 3-6).

The biggest issue remains violence against women and girls. According to UN Women, gender-based intimate partner violence is traditionally surrounded by a culture of silence, and over 20 per cent of married women in Tajikistan experience emotional, physical or sexual violence caused by their husbands, while only one in five victims decides to file a report (UN News 2023). Analysis by the World Bank concluded that over 75 per cent of women who suffered from domestic violence do not tell anyone or seek help, 15 per cent tell someone and only 10 per cent seek help. In addition to physical and psychological violence, women face economic violence, which includes women's limited ability to make financial decisions and lack of agency around income generation (World Bank 2021, page 29). A study by the Asian Development Bank revealed that women with disabilities belonging to minorities are particularly vulnerable as they lack access to information, have lower levels of education and are most likely to have a very limited awareness about their rights (Asian Development Bank 2016, page 47).

Female respondents share such findings and additionally note the existence of street harassment and overall mistreatment of women. For instance, according to a Bashkir respondent, 'As a woman in Tajikistan, you are subjected to harassment 24/7, from your very childhood.' A Bulgarian interviewee stated that Tajikistan 'was not the best place for women and girls, regardless of their ethnic identity.'

Public participation by women in Tajikistan remains low. The goal to reach 30 per cent representation by women in governmental bodies has not been fulfilled yet. For instance, as of 2018, around 20.6 per cent of seats in parliament were held by female MPs. In public sector jobs, women occupy only one-third of positions. Although there is no data concerning the share of minority women within these numbers, there is a prevailing stereotype that the position of women is exacerbated by the lack of financial resources and support systems. For instance, according to data from the Life in Transition Survey in 2016, 84 per cent of female and 89 per cent of male respondents believed that men were better suited to be political leaders compared to women (World Bank 2021, pages 25-26). Among the respondents for this report, there is also a shared concern that women are pushed into performing the traditional roles of being a mother and a housewife.

Russian-speaking respondents shared the experience of being perceived as available for short-term, non-committal relations. Armenian, Bashkir and Russian female respondents reported similar experiences and argued that this affected their self-esteem and overall behaviour.

Gender-related violations are reported to happen within minority communities as well. Girls are reported to be subject to several violations of their personal freedoms. For example, they might not be allowed to finish school or continue their education at a higher level but instead are prepared for marriage and receive religious education. Young Uzbek women are often not allowed to date Tajik men.

> *'I was not allowed to practice music and singing or ride a bicycle and decided to start studies at university in order not get married.'*
> Armenian minority respondent

Women face challenges related to employment. Some studies demonstrate that about 69 per cent of working-age women in Tajikistan were not working for pay as of 2016. Due to gender norms and attitudes, over 90 per cent of economically inactive women (aged 25-49) quoted being a homemaker when explaining their economic inactivity. Such stereotypical beliefs concerning women's social and economic roles are widespread in Tajikistan – over 65 per cent of men and 60 per cent of women thought that women should be responsible for chores at home even if their husbands were not employed (World Bank 2021, pages 13-16). An Uzbek respondent noted that finding a job for a female candidate is a major challenge. The situation is especially difficult for women with children since there are no resources to accommodate flexible arrangements. They shared that often men do not allow women in their family to work in a workplace where there might be other men. If women are allowed to study, they are forced to become nurses or seamstresses in order to provide services to their family members, which limits their freedom in choosing their occupations. Women are frequently forced to abandon their jobs after giving birth and become housewives, which negatively affects their mental health. According to an Armenian respondent, men usually disregard their female candidates before learning about their expertise and knowledge.

At the same time, some minority women respondents noted that their position was in some cases better compared to Tajik women. An Armenian respondent acknowledged the relative freedom they enjoy within their family circle, which would not be available to many Tajik women who also face constraints regarding divorce and education. A Korean respondent expressed their perception of having more freedom compared to Tajik women as well as better access to education. An Uzbek interviewee recalled that Tajik girls they knew were not allowed to study at all, while Uzbeks were called *'kafirs'* (non-believers) and accused of not following their interpretation of Islam.

Government efforts to address harassment, such as installing CCTV cameras, are promising signs of improving safety for women. However, deeply ingrained patriarchal norms continue to pose obstacles for women's empowerment and participation in public life. Despite some improvements, psychological issues among women are often overlooked, highlighting the need for crisis support services. While progress has been made in some areas, structural barriers persist, hindering women's access to education, employment and decision-making roles. Efforts to combat discrimination and promote gender equality must address the intersectional challenges faced by minority women in Tajikistan.

8 Lyulis

The Lyuli minority (also known as Jughi, Mughat, Roma and Gypsies) comprises around 12,000 people. The community resided in all parts of Tajikistan, while the biggest Lyuli settlements are located in the Vose' and Jaloliddin Balkhi districts in the Khatlon region. The community had a nomadic culture when the Soviet authorities tried to enforce a sedentary lifestyle upon them and arranged for Lyuli children to attend schools as well as involved adults in Soviet-style collective farms (Asia-Plus 2021). The community mainly speaks Tajik and predominantly follows the Hanafi school of Islam as does the Tajik majority.

The challenges Lyulis face in Tajikistan can be compared to Roma in Europe. Community members are often subjected to exclusion and marginalization and are mistreated based on widespread stereotypes and lack of information about Lyuli culture and traditions (ADC Memorial 2017, page 3). Other ethnic groups in Tajikistan are reported to have little knowledge about Lyulis, while popular biases are widespread in public opinion about the community. A recent study demonstrated that mass media contributes to the negative portrayal of Lyulis in Tajikistan and uses inappropriate terms such as 'the shame of the nation' (Shoimardonov and Karimov 2022). This further reinforces stereotypes about the community and prevents its members from meaningful and effective participation.

Reports have shown that Lyuli children do not have access to adequate schooling conditions. For instance, during his official visit to Tajikistan, the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues witnessed a school designated for Lyuli schoolchildren that lacked proper sewage facilities or running water, which is the result of differentiated budgetary allocations favouring Tajik schools over Lyuli schools. Overall, children from Lyuli families lack equal access to schools. Those Lyuli children that do access education mostly attend crowded, underfunded and under-resourced school establishments (UN Special Rapporteur 2024, page 13).

In line with official figures, some 1,329 children out of a population of 12,000 Lyulis attend school, which is an extremely low proportion. In general, the community experiences problems when accessing education, for instance when transitioning from primary to secondary school as well as when seeking vocational and higher education (ADC Memorial Alternative Report 2023, pages 2-3).

Lyuli girls and women face intersectional discrimination and are often subject to early marriage and being forced to leave school. Children from Lyuli families are particularly vulnerable to harmful traditional practices such as street begging. Lyuli participants of the focus group discussions argued that Lyuli girls are often forced to leave school or else are not allowed to go there by their families. Respondents reported cases when Lyuli girls had been assaulted on their way to and from school, which forced their parents to withdraw their daughters from school. Lyuli women and girls are not protected against exploitation and harmful traditional practices. Although women in Lyuli families are often considered breadwinners, they only have limited economic agency and financial management skills, which makes them economically vulnerable and dependent.

Access to healthcare for Lyulis remains challenging because of the language barrier and the distant location of health facilities. According to a Lyuli respondent from the Sughd region, their community has access to only one ambulance, and the closest hospital is unreachable by foot. Because of that, there were cases when Lyulis, especially women, did not have access to timely medical help. Lyulis have been particularly vulnerable in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Among the issues concerning the socio-economic participation of Lyulis is lack of access to health and social services. They also face difficulties with regard to procurement of personal documents (including for children) and registration of households (CERD Concluding Observations 2023, page 3). In general, housing remains one of the biggest challenges facing Lyulis. Community members often do not have access to proper sanitation facilities, electricity or running water, while there are often cases of Lyuli families living in unregistered houses.

Lyulis have traditionally faced severe poverty. Some rely on such practices as begging, while the community also generates income from raising livestock, crafts and selling scrap metal. Historically, Lyulis engaged in various types of public performance and remained professional artists, but this was halted due to persecution by more observant Muslims (Asia-Plus

2021). Like most people in Tajikistan, Lyulis also leave for labour migration to Russia.

Despite the multitude of inter- and cross-sectional discrimination faced by the Lyuli community, there are no specialized programmes or state policies in Tajikistan aimed at improving their situation. According to official claims, existing legal frameworks, including the Employment Promotion Act, are sufficient to provide equal opportunities for all citizens, including Lyulis (CERD State Report 2020, pages 5-6). Tajikistan's Children's Ombudsman claimed that all the necessary conditions had been created for Lyuli children to study, and the problem lay with Lyulis who did not want to abandon their customs and traditions (Ruhullo and Abdullo 2019).

On the positive side, there are local initiatives as the provision of birth certificates for Lyuli children free of charge, aimed at reducing the number of persons without identity documents. As shared by focus group participants, hospitals in the Vakhdat and Varzob districts provide Lyuli families with birth certificates on the spot, which not only ensures proper documentation but encourages hospital deliveries. The fee parents usually pay to obtain birth certificates ranges from 0.6 EUR to 1 EUR, which may be a substantial amount for Lyuli families facing extreme poverty.

Regardless of claims that existing Tajik legislation provides a sufficient basis for equal participation and representation, Lyulis continue facing structural discrimination and have no effective access to education, healthcare, employment and housing. The community's inadequate living conditions are exacerbated by their prevailing negative portrayal in public opinion and mass media. Lyuli girls and women are particularly vulnerable and face intersectional discrimination. While such positive initiatives as the free provision of birth certificates are welcome, they are insufficient to address Lyulis' needs, which call for the development and implementation of comprehensive state policies.

Special attention should be paid to Lyuli community leaders and internal informal networks, which can act as first entry points. Due to their isolation and continuous mistreatment by society in general, the Lyuli community is understandably wary of any external interaction. Community leaders and activists must therefore be identified and involved as contact points to maximize the impact of initiatives aimed at improving the situation of Lyulis.

9 Pamiris

The GBAO (or Pamir) is home to the Pamiri minority, an ethnic group not recognized as a national minority in Tajikistan. Since Pamiris are not recognized officially, Tajikistan does not provide information on the group's size. According to alternative resources, Pamiris comprise around 250,000 people or over 3 per cent of the country's population. Pamiris speak their own Pamiri languages and are mainly Isma'ili Shi'a Muslims, unlike the predominantly Sunni majority of Tajikistan. Pamiri respondents underscored their historic connections with the territories of the GBAO and their identity as indigenous peoples.

In 2021-2022, multiple periods of unrest occurred in Khorog, the administrative centre of the GBAO, leading to the deaths and injuries of residents as well as the imprisonment of several activists from Pamir. The events in 2022 were preceded by previous, unresolved conflicts including the killing of a local man, Gulbiddin Ziyobekov, by law enforcement. This incident led to a series of demonstrations in Khorog. Demonstrations only subsided after an agreement with the government was reached to set up a group to investigate Ziyobekov's death. Simultaneously, the Group 44 was created out of local lawyers and activists to oversee the agreement. However, members of Group 44 were later arrested and imprisoned for allegedly organizing illegal meetings and supplying foreign governments with secret information and received lengthy sentences. The internet was shut down in the whole region, which affected all spheres of life, including local businesses and students who had to travel many kilometres to Dushanbe to apply for scholarships (Berdiqulov 2022).

According to Tajik officials, the crackdown in the GBAO had been carried out with the intention 'to protect the legitimate interests and safety of law-abiding citizens, re-establish public order in the region and combat extremist groups' (CERD Summary Records 2023, page 8).

The events in the GBAO have shaped the current situation in the region and have affected the political, cultural, socio-economic and religious life in Pamir. In addition to systematic challenges facing the Pamiri people such as lack of recognition, inadequate socio-economic opportunities and repression, new challenges arose. Freedom of movement was restricted, and Pamiris experienced issues when trying to leave Tajikistan.

The use of Pamiri languages remains a challenge for the community. Pamiri languages are not codified and are mainly used orally. They are not taught or studied in local schools and are absent from local media. The local authorities in the GBAO are forced to speak Tajik. Pamiri respondents share the feeling that their languages have been under attack as it is one of the strongest identity markers for the Pamiri community. Regardless of the state's commitment to developing and promoting Pamiri (and Yaghnobi) languages, they are under threat of extinction.

Traditionally, Pamiris living in the GBAO have demonstrated the highest levels of education. For instance, 84 per cent of women in Pamir have a secondary level education or higher, compared to 53 per cent in Khatlon or 39 per cent in the Districts of Republican Subordination (World Bank 2021, page 4). At the same time, the complete absence of educational initiatives to study and teach Pamiri languages remains a critical issue. Some sources report growing state pressure on schools and kindergartens to use Tajik exclusively (ADC Memorial Alternative Report 2023, page 3).

Pamiris are underrepresented at both the regional and national levels. Respondents from the community described how in the GBAO, even though there are Pamiris in public office, decision-making powers are limited by the central government. At the national level, Pamiris are absent from law enforcement agencies. Such bodies as the ministries of culture or energy, in which Pamiris have held high-ranking positions, are considered less significant by members of the community.

The GBAO is the poorest region in Tajikistan. Pamiris are more likely to migrate compared to other regions' residents since the unemployment rate in Pamir is almost 27 per cent versus the national average of 11.5 per cent. The region lacks modern infrastructure. The transportation system and roads are particularly poor, despite the fact that investment in infrastructure is essential for such a mountainous and hard-to-reach area as Pamir (ADC Memorial Alternative Report 2023, page 4).

After the events of 2021-2022, the properties of Pamiri unofficial leaders and local businessmen were seized by the authorities (U.S. Department of State 2022). The majority of projects implemented by organizations associated with the Isma'ili spiritual leader, the Aga Khan, have been curtailed. In 2023, properties owned by the Aga Khan

Foundation, including the land of the University of Central Asia, the Serena Khorog Inn hotel and the Aga Khan Medical Centre, have been reported to be undergoing nationalization (Kholikzod and Khurramov 2023).

The Pamiri respondents stated that, women are better off in Pamir compared to their peers in other parts of Tajikistan. Pamiri women have better access to education and employment, give birth when they are older and are not subjected to early marriages. At the same time, Pamiri women are often subjected to inappropriate behaviour by security officers, which has increased after the events of 2021-2022 (ADC Memorial Alternative Report 2023, page 3). Outside the GBAO, Pamiri women face prejudice, confronting statements that Pamiri men do not work and that they must provide for their families. After the events of 2022, Pamiri men react negatively if a Pamiri woman engages in a relationship or marries a Tajik man.

According to respondents, the religious freedoms of Pamiris have been significantly curtailed. Thus, only two *jamatkhanas* (places for religious gathering) – one in Khorog and one in Dushanbe – were available for around 250,000 Pamiris to access. Both the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues and the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief stressed that allowing only two *jamatkhanas* 600 kilometres apart to cater for 3-4 per cent of the population was indeed insufficient and in violation of Tajikistan's commitments to implementing the principles of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues 2024, page 11; UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief 2024, page 6). Volunteer groups that were connected to *jamatkhanas* were banned from entering them. The Isma'ili Centre in Dushanbe, which hosts a *jamatkhana,* was urged to scale down its activities and is now only accessible for evening prayers.

The situation concerning the GBAO continues to be volatile. The region presents a lot of potential for human development, socio-economic projects as well as domestic and international tourism. The government of Tajikistan is advised to demilitarize the region and ensure that Pamiris are free to exercise their rights. Cooperation with local informal leaders and activists should be prioritized by the authorities in order to reduce tensions in the region and attempt to rebuild trust between Khorog and Dushanbe.

10 Refugees

As of 2022, over 15,000 refugees from Afghanistan were living in Tajikistan. Tajik legislation limits areas of residence for refugees and does not allow them to settle in Dushanbe, Khujand, the GBAO and other big cities in the country. This creates barriers for refugees to access economic opportunities and integrate properly.

The most pressing issues for refugees are access to personal documents and freedom of movement. Refugees are not informed of their rights or the restrictions they need to follow, which leads to arbitrary detention and harassment by police.

Afghan respondents interviewed for this report described how the community faces numerous financial challenges. Living in Tajikistan is expensive for them: rent should be paid in advance for a year, while public servants charge ten times the official fees for documents. Another major issue is the arbitrary deportation of Afghans back to Afghanistan. This has created a feeling of fear in the community, and many Afghans are now afraid to leave their homes. Those Afghans who have managed to get jobs are constantly subjected to extortion by officials.

Refugees seek redress only occasionally and for two major reasons. First, the level of corruption Afghan refugees face when approaching public authorities prevents them from contacting the justice sector. Second, a lack of legal awareness, including knowledge about the rights of refugees and asylum seekers and Tajikistan's anti-discrimination policies, prevents refugees from seeking legal recourse to improve their situation (Milatović and Kovač 2021, page 102).

The Tajik state needs to develop programmes and policies aimed at the integration of refugees. The UN refugee agency, UNHCR, as well as other countries provide numerous good practice models, where the human potential offered by refugees contributes positively to local communities. Policies and legislation limiting freedom of movement should be reformed in order to provide better access to economic opportunities for refugees. Arbitrary deportation of refugees back to Afghanistan should be stopped as it violates the fundamental international legal principle of *non-refoulement* and can present an existential threat to them.

Recommendations

Governmental Bodies:

1 Cooperate with international organizations and civil society actors to develop and implement a coherent and comprehensive legal system aimed at ensuring and protecting minority rights.
2 Ensure that all steps to protect and promote minority rights are taken with the effective and meaningful participation of minorities themselves; ensure that marginalized and vulnerable groups within minority communities can also make their voices heard.
3 Formalize recognition procedures for national minorities while ensuring clear definitions and criteria based on free self-identification.
4 Improve census accuracy to reflect the diversity of minority populations and avoid misrecognition, ensuring freedom of self-identification.
5 Enhance language education programmes to ensure proficiency in both Tajik and minority languages, supporting language preservation efforts and promoting multilingualism.
6 Strengthen minority language education, including the development and distribution of textbooks and educational materials, training of minority language teachers and access to minority language instruction at all levels of education.
7 Cooperate with neighbouring kin-states to develop minority textbooks and enhance student exchange programmes.
8 Introduce training programmes to prepare minority teachers and allocate resources for their future employment.
9 Ensure streamlined physical access to schools for minority students, including by ensuring that they are located near the communities they serve, developing effective transportation networks, and ensuring students' safety. This is especially crucial for minority girl students and minority students with disabilities.
10 Conduct awareness-raising sessions with parents from minority families, especially Lyulis, to ensure that their children attend schools while putting a special emphasis on minority girls.
11 Protect and promote religious freedoms and limit interference in religious practices. Engage civil society, religious leaders and other stakeholders in addressing religious freedom concerns and promote tolerance and respect for religious diversity in Tajikistan.
12 Enhance data collection on minorities' access to employment, public services, and economic and political participation, while ensuring that the data that is collected is as disaggregated as possible.
13 Promote equal opportunities for all ethnic groups in accessing employment, infrastructure development, healthcare facilities, educational opportunities and economic initiatives, with a focus on minorities.
14 Address structural barriers that hinder minority women's access to education and employment. Develop specialized, appropriate and accessible resources for minority women facing gender-based violence, including crisis centres and hotlines operating in minority languages.
15 Develop specialized programmes and policies aimed at addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by the Lyuli community with a special focus on Lyuli girls and women.
16 Protect the cultural, linguistic and religious rights of Pamiris and provide for their political representation at both the regional and national levels.
17 Reform refugee-related legal frameworks to lift residence restrictions and enable their access to economic opportunities, public services and social integration.

International Organizations:

1 Assist the government in developing a comprehensive legal framework for minority rights provision and protection.
2 Support the establishment of a dedicated independent governmental body to monitor and enforce minority rights, ensuring oversight of relevant legislation and awareness-raising initiatives.
3 Provide technical assistance and funding for targeted awareness-raising campaigns, workshops and educational programmes in collaboration with NGOs and minority community leaders.
4 Assist in establishing monitoring mechanisms for cases of discrimination and rights violations, including hotlines, online platforms and documentation initiatives.

5 Offer expertise and resources to foster regular evaluation and review of legislation to identify potential gaps and areas for improvement.
6 Support efforts to enhance disaggregated data collection on minority access to employment, public participation and economic opportunites and provide assistance in addressing socio-economic disparities faced by minorities.
7 Provide expertise on tackling gender-based violence and promoting minority women's rights and wellbeing, including in economic, social and political areas.
8 Assist the government in developing a strategy and policies aimed at improving the position of Lyuli communities, drawing for instance on good practice models provided by Roma community development programmes in Europe.

Civil Society Organizations:

1 Advocate for the development of a comprehensive minority rights legal framework and offer technical advice.
2 Combat gender-based harassment and discrimination targeting minority women through awareness campaigns, training for law enforcement officials and legal safeguarding mechanisms.
3 Promote minority women's empowerment and participation in public life, including through advocacy, leadership development and economic participation initiatives.
4 Address structural barriers hindering minority women's access to education and employment, while promoting intersectional approaches to combating discrimination.
5 Assist in developing and conducting awareness-raising campaigns and community workshops for parents belonging to minorities on the educational opportunities, rights and resources available to them and their children.
6 Develop specialized programmes and policies to address the challenges faced by specific minorities, such as Lyulis and Pamiris, prioritizing access to education, healthcare, housing and employment opportunities.
7 Advocate for the protection of cultural, linguistic and religious rights of minorities, ensuring political representation and participation at both the regional and national levels.
8 Conduct research and data collection on minorities' access to employment, public participation and economic opportunities, and use the findings to advocate for policy changes and targeted interventions.

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working to secure the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples

Minority Rights Group

The Situation of Minorities in Tajikistan

This report is the first comprehensive survey by Minority Rights Group of the situation facing minorities in Tajikistan, following the security crackdown that commenced in 2022 against the marginalized Pamiri community in Tajikistan. Drawing on interviews and focus group discussions, it provides an in-depth look at the many challenges confronting Tajikistan's minority communities.

The report begins by reviewing Tajikistan's legislative framework and discussing the extent to which the country's minorities know about their rights and the possibilities open to them to seek redress. It then focusses on the ways in which minority communities can express their identities and organize themselves in a context that is often very hostile. The following sections cover the most pertinent issues affecting minorities in Tajikistan today, including language and education rights, religious freedoms, and access to employment, public participation and healthcare. The author also focuses on the intersectional discrimination experienced by minority women.

Crucially, the report provides a nuanced and differentiated look at minority experiences in Tajikistan, where some communities face specific challenges while other minorities have their own concerns. Three standalone sections describe the realities confronted by Lyulis, Pamiris and refugees in Tajikistan. The report concludes with a set of recommendations addressed to the government of Tajikistan, international organizations, human rights advocates and researchers.

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