

Breaking the cycle of exclusion: minority rights in Georgia today

A year and some months after its conflict with the neighbouring Russian Federation, Georgia continues to risk instability. Waves of domestic unrest and deep-seated tensions with Russia over the breakaway territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia may cause the situation in Georgia to deteriorate rapidly.¹

Given this backdrop, the government of Georgia must do more to achieve a truly inclusive and democratic society. This is at the core of urgent demands being made by both Georgian civil society and the international community. In multi-ethnic Georgia, minority community members too often feel neglected and discriminated against. In order for Georgian society to be characterized by a real sense of inclusion, the problems that minorities have long faced must be addressed.

The Georgian government has gradually begun to pay attention to minority issues, notably through the ratification of the European Framework Convention for the Protection of the Rights of National Minorities (FCNM) in 2005² and the adoption of a National Concept and Action Plan for Tolerance and Civil Integration (hereafter, the National Concept) on 8 May 2009.³ These are encouraging steps, however they are not sufficient.

Further reforms should be implemented. Ratification of other international instruments, such as the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML), is necessary for the promotion and protection of minority rights. Further concrete steps, such as changes in domestic legislation and reform of the education system, are also urgently required. Although the government, through its National Concept, has begun to consider these issues, there is a risk that proposed reforms will fail if they do not go far enough, if they ignore certain issues or if they are not correctly implemented.

Following the 2008 conflict, and in light of the current risk of instability, failing to address minority rights issues would not only be a failure to comply with international standards, it would also allow long-standing inter-ethnic tensions on Georgian territory to continue and worsen. Agit Mirzoev, executive director of the Georgian non-governmental organization (NGO) Public Movement Multinational Georgia, spelled out the worst-case scenario:

‘The long-term development of inter-ethnic tension in Georgia has been intensified by the late war. It is a potential source of new conflicts if it remains unaddressed by proper policies,’ he said.⁴

Minorities in Georgia: a brief overview

Georgia is home to a number of national, ethnic and religious minority communities. In 1989, when it was still part of the Soviet Union (USSR), ethnic minorities made up one-third of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia’s population.⁵ Their number decreased following the country’s independence. The most recent national census was taken in 2002. In that year, minorities constituted 16.2 per cent of the population.⁶ The census stated that the largest minority community is Azeri (284,761), followed by Armenians (248,929). The Russian community numbered 67,671. There are also smaller communities of Abkhazs, Assyrians, Greeks, Jews, Kists/Chechens, Kurds, Ossetians, Roma, Ukrainians, and Yezidis.⁷ Several of these are minorities on both ethnic and religious grounds. There are other populations with specific needs. For example, the Meskhetians, a Muslim population originally from Georgia, were forced to leave their home territory during Soviet times and settled in regions in Central Asia. They have been seeking to return to Georgia.

Minority communities are spread out across Georgia. However, a number of minorities are also present in areas where they may constitute numerical majorities, especially in the border provinces of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo-Kartli. These are located close to the kin-states of the main communities who live in these provinces. In 2002, the census noted that ethnic Armenians made up 55 per cent of Samtskhe-Javakheti’s population and were especially concentrated in Javakheti, where they constituted 94 per cent of the population in Akhalkalaki district and 96 per cent in Ninotsminda district. Kvemo-Kartli was 45 per cent populated by Azeris in 2002. It was also home to a number of Armenians and Greeks, mainly located in Tsalka district. In this province, Marneuli and Bolnissi districts were 83 per cent and 66 per cent populated by Azeris respectively.⁸ These minorities are still represented in these areas today.

As will be discussed below, these populations live together in close-knit communities, with little attempt on the part of the state to provide them with services that could help them integrate, so they remain isolated from mainstream society in a number of ways, including with regard to effective political participation, as well as access to quality education, employment and information through the media.

The roots of minority isolation

USSR's nationalities policy emphasized ethnicity before citizenship as the ultimate badge of belonging. Thus, in Soviet Georgia, ethnicity was the basis of many state policies. The 'titular nation'⁹ (ethnic Georgians) had privileged access to high-ranking positions to the detriment of non-titular minorities.¹⁰ Minorities have therefore been excluded from access to high-level decision-making in Georgia over many generations. This has, of course, had a detrimental impact on their effective political participation at all levels of society.

As the Georgian national movement began to challenge Soviet rule in the late 1980s, the independent state-building process placed heavy emphasis on ethnic Georgian identity. The struggle for independence and the legitimacy of the new state were largely expressed and understood as based on the unity of ethnic Georgians. As a result, alternative identities were ignored or excluded from the state's founding mythology.¹¹ Autonomous entities were denounced as internal threats in an outburst of ethnic nationalism that reached its peak after the country's independence in 1991, under the leadership of Zviad Gamsakhourdia. As Georgia declared its independence, autonomous entities within the new state such as Abkhazia and Ossetia also declared theirs. This resulted in conflict, and non-ethnic Georgians came to be portrayed by leaders of the nationalist movement as potentially treacherous outsiders, temporary guests or threats to the integrity of the state. They became subject to discrimination by the majority Georgian population and even by the authorities. For example, Azeri minority members from Bolnisi were forced to leave their homes, and several Azeris were dismissed from government authorities.¹²

After the 1992 civil war, Gamsakhourdia's policies were denounced by the new leadership. But no concrete policies aimed at including minorities or promoting diversity were implemented by the new administration. Therefore, Gamsakhourdia's nationalist policies contributed to the ethnic and territorial disputes which are still alive today. The attitude that minorities are 'guests' or 'threats' has left a lasting mark on Georgian society.

Particularly after the Rose Revolution of 2003, the Georgian government gradually implemented a number of reforms aimed at promoting minority rights.¹³ However, the ostracism minorities suffered when excluded from the state-building process is deep-rooted and they are still

marginalized today. The idea that minority community members are equal citizens is far from common. Mira Sovakar, Caucasus projects manager at the London-based NGO Conciliation Resources, said: 'The Georgian government has not been willing to handle and manage pluralism in their country in a constructive way.' She added: 'Minorities are still perceived as guests on the territory of Georgia, not as full citizens. Guests are always welcome; but they are expected to adapt and not voice any open criticism or concern.'¹⁴

Those minorities, such as Armenians and Azeris, who live in minority-populated areas near their kin-states, can still feel that they are perceived as a threat to the integrity and unity of the Georgian state. Arnold Stepanyan, chair of the Georgian NGO Public Movement Multinational Georgia, said: 'When not seen as guests, minorities are seen as Trojan horses.'¹⁵ For instance, Samtskhe-Javakheti, as explored below, is sometimes branded as a potential conflict zone where Armenian separatists could threaten the integrity of Georgian territory.

The challenging state-building process Georgia went through when gaining its independence from USSR has not yet been fully accomplished. Minority communities are seeking to gain effective political participation as well as full and proper access to their rights. Government efforts such as the National Concept are welcome, but effective implementation and additional efforts are urgently needed to reverse the alienation which is widespread among minorities. In particular, attention must be paid to language rights and access to education, as well as economic and social participation.

Equality: legal provisions, concrete realities

Article 38 of the Georgian Constitution states:

'Citizens of Georgia shall be equal in social, economic, cultural and political life irrespective of their national, ethnic, religious or linguistic belonging. In accordance with universally recognized principles and rules of international law, they shall have the right to develop freely, without any discrimination and interference, their culture, to use their mother tongue in private and in public.'

Equality before the law is enshrined in Article 14 of the Constitution. In terms of access to justice, special measures are in place for minority members, such as the appointment of a translator paid by the state for non-Georgian speakers taking part in criminal, civil and administrative legal proceedings. Minority members are also able to submit documents to the court in their native language.¹⁶ However, minority representatives have reported that the poor quality of translation has the potential to mislead judges.¹⁷ Moreover, legislation is only published in Georgian and not translated into minority

languages, which makes it hard to access for non-Georgian speakers.

The general lack of trust of minorities towards the judicial system, expressed by minority representatives through interviews with the author, is also an issue which would have to be addressed as it impedes minorities' access to justice and hinders reporting of minority rights violations. A study carried out in 2006 showed that, among the persons having reported a violation of their minority rights, only 11 per cent had sought recourse through the judicial system.¹⁸

Article 43 of the Constitution states that: 'The protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms within the territory of Georgia shall be supervised by the Public Defender of Georgia.' Protecting minority rights is listed as one of the priority areas of the Public Defender's Office, where a Tolerance Center, hosting a Council of Religions and a Council of Ethnic Minorities created in 2005,¹⁹ has been established.²⁰ However, although one of the missions of the Public Defender's Office is to enquire into human rights violations, the number of discrimination complaints brought to the Public Defender's Office has been extremely low in the last few years, although they rose from no cases in 2003 to five in 2006.²¹ Again, the reason for this must be lack of trust in judicial processes rather than reflecting the reality minorities face.

As discussed below, poor access to learning the majority Georgian language is a key issue in preventing access to rights, as is lack of access to political participation, and discrimination in areas including employment. The new Labour Code explicitly prohibits discrimination in its Article 2(3),²² although the definition of discrimination enshrined therein is far from meeting international standards.²³

Although Georgian legislation regularly reaffirms the principle of equality before the law, it does not contain a sufficient basis for discrimination to be challenged. No comprehensive anti-discrimination law has been enacted so far. A perception of deep-seated discrimination exists in the minds of many belonging to minority communities. It is this historically rooted sense of marginalization which must now be addressed. An anti-discrimination law which pays particular attention to the issues discussed below would be an important step forward.

Language

A severe obstacle to integration that minorities, particularly those living together in their own communities, face is their poor command, if any, of the Georgian language.²⁴ Knowledge of Georgian was not necessary during Soviet times, when minorities could communicate with the authorities in Russian. In the independent Georgian state, knowledge of Georgian is essential in order to access everything, from higher education to state services. Georgian is still the only official language of the country.²⁵

Education and language

Minorities are marginalized through their lack of access to quality education, particularly with regard to language training. Though mother-tongue education is provided through the system of parallel minority-language schools (inherited from the Soviet era) for the main minority communities (Armenians, Azeris, Russians) in compliance with the law,²⁶ the system is flawed and this further marginalizes minorities. For example, there has been insufficient harmonization of curricula with Georgian-language schools. This is extremely problematic since minorities have had to rely on their kin-states for textbooks.²⁷

Since 2007, however, several Georgian schoolbooks translated into minority languages have been provided to minority schools. An increasing number of these are expected in the near-future. This is a very encouraging step.²⁸

But further efforts towards aligning the curricula are urgently needed. Especially when it comes to teaching history, the curricula are very different from one South Caucasus country to the next. Moreover, the Georgian curriculum does not pay much attention to minority communities. Reforms in this field at a national level are expected. It is vital that the Georgian government ensures they are implemented promptly and efficiently.²⁹

Another major issue is the lack of adequate teaching of the Georgian language in minority schools. Pupils often graduate without mastering it.³⁰ Georgian remains the only language of higher education, as predicated by Article 4 of the Law on Higher Education. This deals a blow to any hopes of entering university for most graduates from minority schools. Even university branches located in minority-populated regions, such as the former Akhalkalaki branch of Tbilisi State University, which is in an Armenian-populated area, only teach in Georgian.³¹ Minority languages are only used by private institutions or branches of foreign universities not accredited in Georgia, such as the Armenian Yerevan State University in Akhalkalaki.

Moreover, in 2005–6, a compulsory national university entrance examination was established, covering (among other topics) Georgian language and literature. The year 2005 also saw the publication and free dissemination of *Tavtavi*, a textbook teaching Georgian as a second language. After students from minority-populated areas achieved alarmingly poor results in the entrance exams, in 2006 the Ministry of Education lowered the language level required for minority school graduates and implemented a special Preparation Programme for them.³² However, the exam is still impossible to pass without a good command of the Georgian language. Access to higher education in Georgia is therefore impossible in practice for minority young adults who cannot master Georgian. They have to turn to their kin-states, or Russia, if they wish to pursue their studies. One Azeri activist in Georgia said, 'Students can only study in [the] Azeri language, which is impossible here. They therefore leave for Azerbaijan.'³³

While some of the Georgian government's positive attempts to address minorities' exclusion from education have been noted above, some policies have a negative impact. These include the increasing appointment to minority schools of Georgian teachers who are not proficient in minority languages. In these schools, Georgian is not used as the language of instruction and many of the students do not speak it. These measures are deeply unpopular among minority community members, some of whom say they fear that these are disguised attempts at assimilation. One representative of the Azeri community said:

*'More and more ethnic Georgians are appointed as headmasters or teachers, for instance in the villages of Mukanlo and Vakhtangissi. They do not know any Azeri, and Azeris do not speak any Georgian. How can we communicate? This is an issue for us.'*³⁴

Whether fears of assimilation are well-founded in the current situation or based on historical experience, a balance of teachers and teaching in minority and majority languages, cultures, religion and history would greatly benefit all communities and ease tensions.

According to the Law on General Education adopted in 2005, Georgian history and geography classes, taught in Georgian, should be introduced in minority-language schools by 2010. While this may be aimed at better integration, it is another contentious initiative, according to minorities who fear assimilation. Such an initiative, if it were to be implemented now when many minority pupils do not master the Georgian language, could be extremely problematic.

Language obstacles to economic and social participation

Access to public services is a matter of concern for non-Georgian speaking minorities. Local languages may be spoken when accessing public services in minority-populated areas. However, no multilingual public services are officially provided and there is no guarantee that non-Georgian speakers can access those services in their mother-tongue. Moreover, all official documentation and correspondence have to be submitted in Georgian.³⁵

Similarly, equal access to employment is also hindered by language-related issues. The unemployment rate is high in all rural and economically marginalized areas; this is therefore also the case in areas which are predominantly populated by minority communities, where most inhabitants work on the land in agriculture, cattle-breeding and farming.³⁶ The language barrier further marginalizes minorities as they can often only rely on their own community to find employment within Georgia.

Access to information

Although Article 24(1) of the Georgian Constitution guarantees the right to freely receive or impart information, minority communities often face difficulties accessing information in the Georgian media because of the language barrier. The public broadcaster is legally bound 'to reflect in its programmes ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious, age and gender diversity of the society and to broadcast programmes in minority languages in proportion'.³⁷ It does air some programmes in minority languages: the daily 25-minute news programme *National Moambe*, broadcast in Abkhaz, Armenian, Azeri, Ossetian and Russian; a daily five-minute news programme in those languages aired on public radio; and a weekly 20-minute news programme in Russian. While this is welcome, the amount of broadcast time allotted could be extended in order to provide more or longer programmes. This would offer minority listeners and viewers more in-depth coverage of national and international news.

The range of Georgian print media available in minority languages is also limited. The Georgian government provides financial support to minority publications, such as *Vrastan*, the Armenian-language newspaper, and *Svobodnaia Gruzia*, the Russian-language newspaper. However, *Svobodnaia Gruzia* essentially focuses on entertainment.

Minorities often rely on foreign news sources for information, such as Azerbaijani, Armenian or Russian TV. This phenomenon can only accentuate the isolation and alienation felt by those communities in Georgian society. Furthermore, accessing any Russian media was impossible during and after the August 2008 conflict.³⁸ Some Russian channels are now accessible, but, according to sources, they broadcast mainly entertainment programmes.

Political participation

National minority communities suffer from a serious lack of representation in Georgian national institutions. In 2008, there were only five Members of Parliament belonging to minority groups (two Armenians and three Azeris).³⁹ Besides addressing structural causes, such as the language issue detailed above, special measures are also needed to increase minorities' political participation. These could include the allocation of reserved seats or adjustment of electoral district boundaries.⁴⁰ Such steps could tackle the low representation of minorities in Georgian political and governmental bodies.

The Constitutional prohibition of ethnically based parties in Georgia is seen by a number of minority representatives as one of the obstacles to better representation. Effective access to political influence at the national level may not really be achievable for minorities when they are represented by mainstream parties. Ethnically based parties could be a better political conduit

for certain minorities and may indeed be a means to increase minorities' political representation.

The principle of local self-governance is written into the Georgian Constitution.⁴¹ The number of minority representatives in local self-governance bodies in minority-populated regions is more proportionate in terms of the population. After the local self-governance elections of 2006, it was reported that 48.5 per cent of the elected councilors in districts with larger minority populations were from minority communities themselves. This encouraging result was partly due to the printing of information materials and electoral bulletins in the main minority languages, Armenian, Azeri and Russian, for the first time. They were distributed in districts with a high percentage of ethnic minorities; an initiative which proved to be very successful.⁴²

Women from minority communities

It is very difficult to access data on the situation of minority women in Georgia, particularly regarding the issues discussed above. Nevertheless, the fact that there are no minority women Members of Parliament reflects the difficulties faced by minority women when it comes to effective political participation. The Georgian government should pay particular attention to mainstreaming gender in any potential initiatives implemented to tackle the issue of effective minority political representation.

There is a general lack of information on the situation of minority women in Georgia, as highlighted by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2006. In its comments on Georgia, it said: 'The Committee is concerned about the lack of information on the situation of rural women and ethnic minority women in the areas covered by the Convention.'⁴³

A number of practical steps should be taken by the Georgian government to address this gap. As Minority Rights Group International (MRG) has outlined in previous reports, disaggregating official data, for instance on education, as per ethnicity and gender, would be an important step towards investigating the situation of minority women and ensuring the full enjoyment of their rights.⁴⁴

Freedom of religion

Since 2005, religious communities are allowed to register in Georgia, but only as not-for-profit organizations. Minority representatives express their frustration regarding this situation, as they feel it is not acceptable for their religious bodies to have to register as non-commercial private legal entities.⁴⁵

Minority rights activists have described the Georgian Orthodox Church as the 'most powerful political party in the country'.⁴⁶ There are indeed serious issues relating to minorities who represent religious groups distinct from the

Georgian Orthodox Church. The Armenian community, for example, is confronted by issues relating to the ownership of religious buildings. The historic ownership of several churches which were nationalized under the USSR is a matter of dispute between the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Georgian Orthodox Church.⁴⁷

Muslim minorities, including Azeris, mainly face issues related to the considerable difficulty of building places of worship.⁴⁸ Such issues are not only an infringement of the freedom of religion, as guaranteed by international human rights instruments which Georgia is a party to, they are also highly contentious and have to be resolved in order for members of minorities to feel that they indeed are equal citizens, as the National Concept would suggest.

Discrimination in the media

Article 15 of the Georgian Code of Conduct of Public Broadcasting states:

'When reporting on ethnic and religious minorities, it is unacceptable to discriminate based on race, gender, religious affiliation/belonging, political views, ethnic origins, cultural and social belonging, family, property and other status, place of residence, state of health, age and any other characteristic.'

It states that mentioning the ethnicity of a criminal or a suspect is not advised, nor is linking professions to ethnicity, or proposing any activity is characteristic of an ethnic group. It further stipulates that journalists should feature minority representatives speaking for themselves in news reports, and calls on journalists to challenge any discriminatory statements made by their interviewees against minorities.

Unfortunately, current media practice falls far short of this ideal. According to a survey by the NGO United Nations Association of Georgia, the ethnicity of criminals or suspects, for instance, is regularly emphasized when they are not of Georgian descent. Clichés and prejudices are widespread in the media.⁴⁹

Abkhazians and Ossetians are mostly referred to in a context of conflict and subsequently portrayed as 'separatists' or 'supporters of separatists'.⁵⁰ 'The media is trying to make enemies out of us', said a representative of the Ossetian community in Georgia:

*'This has very negative effects on the trust between communities and might be a cause of the non-resolution of the conflicts. This spreads fear among the Georgian community, but also the Ossetian one, since we fear we will be expected to assimilate and disappear as a nation.'*⁵¹

Particularly in the aftermath of the August 2008 conflict, mainstream media reports interchangeably used the same

vocabulary for the Russian state, the Russian government and Russians in general. As Olga Dorokhina, programme manager at the Tbilisi-based NGO South Caucasus Institute for Regional Security (SCIRS) said:

*'Our media monitoring shows that unfortunately ethnicity is emphasized rather than state; [when covering the conflict] media are mentioning "Russians, Russians, Russians"... in the future this could create problems. This language can be found in most newspapers but also in speeches of public officials. It might be easier to use a short word like "Russians", but it is better to sometimes use a longer phrase like "Russian Federation", "Russian government", "the government of the Russian Federation".'*⁵²

In late August 2008, a Georgian pop song, 'Russia 2008' by Temo Rtskhiladze, performed by Zurab Doijashvili and which branded Russia a 'country of skinheads', was broadcast on mainstream Georgian TV. This was strongly criticized by civil society organizations. The Public Defender Sozar Subari said the song was, 'defamatory toward Russians as a people. The swear words and insults in the lyrics are directed not toward specific politicians, but toward the entire nation.'⁵³ He called for it to be taken off the air.

There are reports of particularly biased coverage of Armenians in the Georgian media, which is said to originate from and feed into the public perception of Armenians as traditional allies of Russians and potential separatists. 'One can almost say that if anything is happening in Samtskhe-Javakheti, the media will start with a reference to separatist tendencies,' explains Alexandra Delemenchuk, policy adviser at the NGO Public Movement Multinational Georgia. Referring to the killing of Hrant Dink, the prominent Turkish-Armenian journalist and human rights activist, in Turkey in January 2007, she added: 'When Hrant Dink was murdered in Turkey, some Armenian schools decided to light candles for him in the schoolyard since he was an important figure for the community. One TV channel covered it as a nationalist event.'⁵⁴

This tendency intensified during and after the August 2008 conflict, when Samtskhe-Javakheti was portrayed in some media as the next separatist location and Armenians as traditional allies of Russians. Speaking in April 2009, Mira Sovakar of NGO Conciliation Resources said: 'We were concerned some months back when there was quite a strong hysteria within the Georgian media about Russians planning to instigate violence in Javakheti.' She said the media reported that there would be a new separatist movement.⁵⁵

The complex situation of Samtskhe-Javakheti and the claims for autonomy from certain nationalist Armenian actors are leading mainstream public opinion to see many demands of Armenian minority leaders as steps towards

separatism, a perception fuelled by media reports. In September 2009, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan recommended that Georgia should classify Armenian as a regional language, solve the Armenian-Georgian churches dispute and officially register the Armenian Apostolic Church in Georgia. The media reacted strongly, mentioning threats of division, instability, separatism and probable Russian manipulations.⁵⁶

Other minorities have also reported a regularly negative portrayal in Georgian media. A Yezidi community representative noted that the Yezidis are often presented as potential criminals or low-class people working as street-cleaners.⁵⁷ Discrimination in the media both originates from and exacerbates a widely held majority perception that minorities are still guests and/or a factor of destabilization. This perception can sometimes degenerate into aggressive behaviour.

Hate-motivated violence and inter-ethnic tensions

The scale of hate-motivated violence in Georgia is difficult to estimate. Minorities' lack of trust in state institutions, and their fear of retaliation, may contribute to crimes going unreported. Victims almost never initiate proceedings against the perpetrators.

A small but steady number of hate-motivated offences are nevertheless being recorded by national and international organizations. In the aftermath of the 2008 conflict, for example, the NGO Public Movement Multinational Georgia reported two beatings of ethnic Russians and several threats against ethnic Ossetians.⁵⁸

Unresolved ethnic and religious issues occasionally flare up in acts of hostility. For example, on 16 November 2008, Father Taniel Sikinchelashvili, a Georgian Orthodox priest, attempted to remove Armenian gravestones from the Norashen church in Tbilisi, of which the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church both claim historic rights of ownership. This was denounced by the Armenian community as an attempt to destroy evidence that the church was Armenian.⁵⁹ The priest now officiates at another church.

The stronger the feelings of exclusion become, the greater the likelihood of eventual inter-ethnic clashes. Mira Sovakar said: 'Potential [for new conflicts] somehow is always there and has always been there. It is a question of how the different parties are handling this.'⁶⁰

The Georgian government urgently needs to address these tensions by promoting diversity and a non-ethnically based definition of Georgian citizenship. Efforts have been made through the adoption of the National Concept and, notably, the creation of the website Diversity.ge, which is aimed at centralizing information on minority issues and raising awareness among citizens.⁶¹ However, such initiatives, if not complemented by more accessible activities such as public awareness-raising campaigns and

the promotion of diversity in schools, risk being ineffective, since a dedicated website does not necessarily reach the core target audience, namely majority Georgian society. The National Concept plans to introduce ‘Tolerance’ as a subject in the secondary school curriculum by 2014. While this initiative is welcome, promoting inclusiveness is a task that extends beyond promoting tolerance; namely, the course should also emphasize equality, celebrate diversity and encourage real change.

Ways forward

The European Union (EU), which plays a major part in the region, has been developing its relations with Georgia during the last few years, notably through its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the present Eastern Partnership Programme. The five-year EU–Georgia ENP Action Plan was adopted in late 2006, in order to ‘ensure respect for rights of persons belonging to national minorities’. As general first steps in its cooperation with the EU, Georgia has been asked to: ‘sign and ratify the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages’ and ‘develop and implement a civic integration strategy and ensure its implementation, including creation of appropriate monitoring instruments’.

Georgia’s adoption of the National Concept and the Action Plan discussed above are promising steps towards complying with the last requirement. It is now the responsibility of the Georgian government to ensure that this and other objectives will be fully met. Implementing the National Concept and supplementing it by addressing the issues described in this report, among others, will be major steps towards ensuring the full inclusion of minority communities in Georgia.

Recent reforms leave minorities hopeful for the future. However, the government, in close and meaningful consultation with civil society and minority communities, has to make sure that these reforms go far enough and that minority concerns are addressed properly. The establishment of an inclusive society which accepts and promotes diversity and pluralism is the key to defusing at least some of the multiple tensions that Georgia is currently experiencing.

Recommendations

To the Georgian government:

- The government of Georgia should sign and ratify the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, as it committed to on joining the Council of Europe in 1999.
- The government of Georgia should provide a definition of national minorities, about which it had filed a reservation when ratifying the FCNM.
- A comprehensive anti-discrimination mechanism should be created, such as an equality law overseen by an independent monitoring and complaints body.
- The government of Georgia should continue its efforts to promote bilingual education. Projects should be designed and carried out in consultation with minority communities and civil society organizations.
- The Georgian language examination which partly determines access to higher education should be further simplified, or even made optional for minority community members. Complementary measures, such as intensive Georgian classes for students not fluent in Georgian, should be implemented in the first year of state university. Availability of similar training prior to the university entrance examinations should be broadened.
- The introduction of ‘Tolerance’ as a subject in the secondary school curriculum by 2014 should also emphasize equality and celebrate diversity.
- The provision of the 2005 Law on General Education requiring minority-language schools to teach Georgian history, geography and other social sciences classes in the Georgian language by 2010 should be amended.
- Multilingual state services should be provided – at least in minority-populated areas.
- More high-quality programmes in minority languages should be broadcast by the public media services.
- Special measures should be considered to ensure better representation of minorities and their more effective participation in national institutions.
- Discriminatory and prejudiced statements in the media should be monitored; they should be addressed by initiatives such as the training of journalists on minority rights.
- Religious freedom should be ensured and a number of long-standing issues, such as the Georgian–Armenian church dispute, should be urgently resolved.
- Georgia should actively promote an inclusive, non-ethnically based definition of Georgian citizenship through the implementation of nation-wide awareness-raising programmes, for instance through civic education at schools.
- The government should disaggregate official data, e.g. on education, by both ethnicity and gender in order to

gain a better understanding of the situation facing minority women.

To the EU:

- The EU should pay greater attention to minority rights and mainstream them in all the programmes it implements in Georgia, notably through its European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership Programme.

Endnotes

- 1 Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), 'Georgia opposition brush aside call for dialogue', CRS No. 487, 3 April 2009, URL: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/49dc4b1d1c.html>
- 2 With a reservation on the definition of national minorities.
- 3 http://www.diversity.ge/files/files/National%20Concept_Eng_ADOPTED.pdf
- 4 Interview with author, 28 April 2009.
- 5 As recorded in the 1989 national census.
- 6 The 2002 census excludes data on the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.
- 7 Yezidis speak Kurmanci, a Kurdish dialect; some of them consider they belong to the Kurdish community whereas others emphasize that they do not.
- 8 As recorded in the 2002 national census. Numbers from *Basic Results of the First General Census of the Georgian Population* (Tbilisi: Georgian State Statistical Department, 2004), as quoted by Broers, L., 'Filling the void: ethnic politics and nationalities policy in post-conflict Georgia', *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2008, pp. 275–304.
- 9 Titular nations were given access to statehood through a range of autonomous entities set up along ethnic lines; in the case of Georgia, the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic.
- 10 Ethnic Georgians, who constituted 66.8 per cent of the Georgian population in 1970, occupied 97.2 per cent of leading political positions in the Soviet Georgian Republic in the period between 1955 and 1972, according to Hodnett, *Leadership in the Soviet National Republics*, quoted in Broers, op. cit.
- 11 Nodia, G., 'Georgia: dimensions of insecurity', in B. Coppieters and R. Legvold (eds), *Statehood and Security*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005, p.7.
'Georgians, as is often true in Eastern Europe, have defined belonging to a nation in an ethnically exclusivist way. For the vast majority of Georgians, a "Georgian" was a person who shared both a (mythological) common origin (that is, who was a Georgian "by blood") and a Georgian culture (especially Georgian language). For many (but not all) Georgians, this also included the Eastern Orthodox religion. Therefore, Georgian political nationalism was also ethnic: it implied that Georgians as a nation deserved an independent and indivisible state of their own, but only ethnic Georgians were considered full members of the nation.'
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Breaking the Cycle of Exclusion: Minority Rights in Georgia Today

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