



Georgia's Policy towards its National Minorities: Tolerance or Integration

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Historically, Georgia has been a multiethnic country and remains so to this day. Georgians consider that they are among the most tolerant countries/nations in the world and argue that non-Georgian minorities residing in the country have never been threatened or suppressed or otherwise disenfranchised. Minority communities in Georgia do not always share this opinion, however. Feeling isolated and deprived, minorities often accuse the national authorities of being unwilling to take the issues more seriously and address the existing problems.

Georgia has recognised the international principles and best practices regarding the policy towards national minorities and the need for their integration. The country is a signatory to the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) and takes note of most international instruments and recommendations on the subject of minority rights.¹ However, the country has not ratified other important conventions, notably the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages.² Taking note of the fact that effective protection of rights of minorities at times substantially differs from the general protection of human rights the EU-Georgia ENP Action Plan specifically addresses this issue. Chapter 4.1.1 calls on Georgia to “ensure respect for rights of persons belonging to national minorities; sign and ratify European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages” and “develop and implement a civic integration strategy and ensure its implementation, including creation of appropriate monitoring instruments.” In spite of these international commitments, the government has not addressed the issue in a coherent and consistent manner.

This paper will explore the state policy towards national minorities in general and on the individual institution level and review several key concerns voiced by minorities and the state's responses to them.

The Georgian State and National Minorities

The three largest ethnic groups³ in Georgia are Georgians (83.8% of the population), Azeris (6.5%), and Armenians (5.7%). The remaining 4% is made up of smaller groups, including Abkhaz, Ossetians, Russians, Ukrainians, Kurds/Yezids, Greeks, etc. When discussing national minorities, emphasis is placed on Armenians and Azeris. Besides the sheer numbers, there is another reason for this. Although there are sizable communities of both Armenians and Azeris in Tbilisi, the bulk of them are concentrated along the borders with their kin states (Armenians in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Azeris in Kvemo Kartli). In many districts of the regions the minorities actually account for the majority of the population. For example, Azeris make up to 83% of the population in Marneuli district and over 66% in both Bolnisi and Dmanisi. Armenians make up 94% and 95% of the population in the districts of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda respectively. This raises concerns about irredentism and Georgia's territorial integrity, a subject of great concern considering the two provinces currently outside the de facto authority of the country (South

¹ These include the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities and the OSCE documents: The Hague Recommendation Regarding the Educational Rights of National Minorities and Explanatory Note; Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on Human Dimension of the OSCE; The Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life and Explanatory Note.

² There has not been much public discussion of either what the Charter obliges the signatories to do or what consequences it might have for Georgia. However, both the ruling majority and opposition so far seem to be strongly opposed to its ratification. Their concern seems to be legalisation of minority languages in the bordering regions, ostensibly due to fears of irredentism. Another lesser concern can be the demand for official recognition of Megrelian or Svan languages. Although both Megrelians and Svans are ethnic Georgians, they both have distinct languages, which are part of the Kartvelian language family.

³ 2002 National Census



Ossetia and Abkhazia). The fears and insecurities associated with the ethno-territorial turmoil of the early 1990s still largely define the attitudes and actions towards national minorities both on the state and, to some degree, even on the personal level.

The policy of Georgia's first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, did not help relations with Georgia's national minorities. Gamsakhurdia was the charismatic leader of the nationalist movement that led Georgia to independence from the USSR. But Gamsakhurdia's nationalism did not serve the country well once he got to head it after independence. Although Georgian citizenship laws were made quite liberal after independence (everyone living on the territory automatically became a citizen, regardless of ethnicity, etc, unless they themselves refused it), this was not the initial wish of the man who coined the motto "Georgia for Georgians." Despite the fact that the laws of the young Georgian state were not actually discriminatory towards minorities, the overall tense and nationalistic atmosphere forced many representatives of minority communities to leave Georgia. Many left for kin states, including Israel, Armenia, and Russia. Although no reliable data is available on who left, for where, or why, looking at the census data over the years gives an indication of the changes in the country's ethnic composition. The data from 1979, 1989, and 2002 shows the Armenian population of Georgia falling from 9% to 8.1% to 5.7%. The decrease of the Russian population was even more dramatic, falling from 7.4% to 6.3% and then to 1.5%.

During Eduard Shevardnadze's presidency (1995-2003), the state lacked a policy toward national minorities. Shevardnadze's time is well known for its lack of policy elaboration and implementation. His tenure is probably best characterised as an attempt to balance different interests to maintain stability. In general, this meant that while on the surface there was no immediate or explosive conflict, problems were brewing underneath. This was very much evident with regards to national minorities, who were largely ignored by the Tbilisi authorities and integration and other problems were not recognised at all. Practically, the minority-populated regions were governed by local clans who were obliged to support Shevardnadze and his party. This was demonstrated by transporting the population to the polls on election day and delivering votes for the ruling party. Otherwise, the state did not interfere in these regions. Naturally, there was little need or use for policy documents.

After the "Rose Revolution" of 2003, the new government, especially President Mikheil Saakashvili, began to refer to the issue of national minorities on a frequent basis. President Saakashvili in his speeches likes to emphasise Georgia's multiethnic makeup and the great potential this carries.⁴ The president and other high officials now frequently talk of the need to integrate national minorities into Georgian society and stress that this does not mean assimilation and abandoning own identities. Rather, the new government is promoting civic nationalism over the ethnic pride that has so far dominated Georgian history.

Still, to date Georgia has neither developed a comprehensive document outlining its policy towards minorities nor shown a coherent policy orientation in its actions. However, on the institutional level, the Office of the State Minister⁵ on Civil Integration⁶ was created following the "Rose Revolution" to signal the importance the new administration gives to bettering the lot of the minorities in Georgia and integrating them into the mainstream society. This body headed by Zinaida Bestaeva, arguably the least active and recognizable minister of the entire Cabinet, is in charge of formulating the civil integration policy and coordinating its elaboration and implementation with all other state institutions. Critics have often voiced concerns that both the creation of the ministerial position and the selection of its head were politically

⁴ As a symbolic gesture, during the inauguration ceremony of Mr. Saakashvili as a president in January 2004 he addressed the nation with a multilingual speech, greeting various ethnic groups in their native language. The flag of Georgia was jointly raised by children dressed in national costumes of the various ethnicities living in Georgia.

⁵ In Georgia a state minister is a cabinet minister without a formal ministry, but with an office instead. Arguably some state ministers have proven to be more influential than traditional ministers, depending on their field of authority.

⁶ This organisation has however ceased to exist in January 2008



motivated, rather than prompted by an earnest desire for the new structure to function effectively - Ms Bestaeva was then the only woman in the cabinet and an ethnic Ossetian⁷. The Office is furthermore argued to be understaffed and under-equipped for its work. In addition to the Office of the State Minister, there is the ministerial level Council on Civil Integration and Tolerance, also chaired by Ms. Bestaeva, which includes representatives of civil society. This is the body created for drafting the Civil Integration Strategy/Concept and its implementation Action Plan.

Other state institutions involved in formulating the policy are the Ombudsman's Office and the Council of National Minorities under it. The president too has an advisor on issues of civil integration. On the legislative side, the Human Rights and Civil Integration Committee has traditionally been active and vocal in its endeavours. Besides these specialised institutions, the Ministry of Education and Science plays quite a significant role in supporting the civic integration of national minorities, since a significant problem for the minorities and a major obstacle to their integration into Georgian society is the lack of Georgian language skills.

Relative Deprivation

Major research on the topic of national minorities in Georgia consistently refers to their general sense of being treated as second class citizens. They feel that while the rest of the country prospers and develops, the regions where they actually are the majority have not seen much change in conditions throughout the last decade. However, it must be acknowledged that in other rural regions of Georgia, where majority of inhabitants are ethnic Georgians, the situation, especially economics and infrastructure-wise, is no different. National minorities, mostly secluded in their communities, fail to grasp that the development boom is largely confined to Tbilisi and tourist centres, while the rest of the country lags behind.

The seclusion has several reasons. Firstly, up until very recently, conditions of roads and communications with Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti were disastrous, severely limiting contact with the rest of the country. Secondly, this situation was, and still is, exacerbated by the fact that the signals of Georgian TV stations, including public broadcasting, largely fail to reach these regions, effectively leaving the regions in an information vacuum from the Georgian side. The minority regions have therefore tapped into the information sphere of their kin states. Azeri and Armenian populations get their news via Azeri, Armenian, Russian, and Turkish TV outlets that do not focus much on Georgian events and developments. Thirdly, given the limited economic possibilities in these regions, national minorities tend to have closer economic ties with their kin state across the border, rather than rest of Georgia. These tend to be small-scale trade and short-term employment opportunities.

But perhaps the single largest obstacle to communication and interaction/integration is the absence of a common language. The minority population largely does not know the Georgian language, despite being born and raised in the country. During the Soviet times, Russian served as a *lingua franca* among the different nationalities living in the country and facilitated communication among the soviet republics. This practically eliminated the need for studying the state language, which was always only Georgian in Georgia, unlike in other republics. Rather than promoting integration into local cultures, the USSR's policy goal was to form loyal citizens of the USSR.

This legacy has left strained relations among nationalities in present day Georgia. While the minority feels alienated, the majority feels threatened by concentrated populations of national minorities with little

⁷ Another woman ministers are Eka Tkeshelashvili, appointed to head the Ministry of Justice in August 2007 and Maia Miminoshvili, appointed Minister of Education and Science in November 2007, however following the new cabinet reshuffle in January 2008, currently the only female Minister is Ekaterine Sharashidze, heading Ministry of Economic Development.



connection to Georgian culture, especially the Georgian language. The language issue becomes further complicated because of the diminishing role of the Russian language since 1991. While the older generation does have at least some proficiency in this language (except in more remote villages), the generation born in independent Georgia no longer learns Russian. This ignorance is equally widespread among national minorities and ethnic Georgians, and has eliminated the only means of bridging these communities. To date, Russian has not been replaced by a new common language, most logically – Georgian.

Public Education and National Minorities

Since independence, Georgia has maintained the Soviet system of public schools, which allows different languages of instruction. Thus Georgian citizens of school age can enrol in Georgian, Russian, Armenian, and Azeri language public schools. In addition, there are mixed schools, where within one school there can be different language “departments” or “sectors”. Thus, for example, a regular Georgian language school may have a Russian sector, where students are instructed in Russian. This system allows minorities from sizable communities to receive full primary and secondary education in their native languages. Unfortunately, these schools often fail to live up to the Georgian national educational requirements for the teaching of the Georgian language.⁸

Many schools also fail to meet the basic criteria for teachers of Georgian languages. Some Georgian language teachers in the regions populated by national minorities do not know the language themselves. Although there are no real data on the number of such teachers, the first hand experiences of Transparency International Georgia⁹ and other organisations working on the issue suggest that this is the norm rather than an exception.

Prior to the recent reforms, the non-Georgian schools in the minority-populated areas mostly depended on their respective kin state for textbooks. This particularly concerned the Ministry of Education and those interested in the education/minority policy since core social science courses (e.g. history and geography) focus on the kin state rather than Georgia. This inadequacy or non-existence of Georgian educational requirements further exacerbated the problems caused by the lack of Georgian language skills and impeded minority access to higher educational institutions.

Unlike primary and secondary schools, practically the only language of instruction in universities other than Georgian is Russian, with a few English language programs at state and private universities. Several English language programs do exist both within state and private universities, but these mostly target foreign students and are largely irrelevant for the needs of domestic minorities.

Minority enrolment in domestic universities has become an issue since the new administration took charge. In recent years, the Ministry of Education launched a large-scale reform of the entire education sphere, which included the introduction of the new Unified National Exam (UNE) for university admission. While previously each institution administered its own exams and decided the programmatic requirements, for the last three years the unified national examination has been run by a semi-independent agency under the Ministry. The previous system, notorious for its corrupt dealings that favoured money over merit, has been eradicated in the state-accredited universities. The new process itself has won great public trust and is largely considered both corruption free and fair.

⁸ Currently, Georgian language classes are required for three hours a week, though the Ministry of Education states the programmes are being reworked.

⁹ Transparency International Georgia and International Centre for Georgian Language Recommendations for Better Integration of National minorities available at: http://www.transparency.ge/files/190_375_633421_Ti%20Georgia%20and%20ICG.pdf



The UNE is comprised of three mandatory standardised tests: Georgian language, general abilities, and a foreign language (Russian, English, French, or German). In the first year of the exams, there were two versions of the Georgian language test: one for native speakers and one for non-native speakers that was available in Russian. Applicants who took the latter were able to apply only to non-Georgian departments. In the second year of the exam, there was only one version of the Georgian language test for all applicants, though applicants could apply to any university. The remaining tests were still offered in Russian versions.

Minority representatives have argued that the change in the Georgian language test requirement is discriminatory, since non-native speakers cannot possibly compete with students graduating from Georgian language schools on equal footing and will correspondingly have much slimmer chances of university entrance. But the Ministry maintains that the examination aims at testing language comprehension of the applicants, not their knowledge or memory of complex Georgian literary works. Besides, the threshold for passing the exams, including Georgian, is very low at 15%. This, the education authorities argue, is the absolute minimum to demonstrate qualification for university level study.

The complicated system of weighting the importance of different exams, as determined by the university and department, suggests that the Georgian language tests are assigned far smaller significance for the Russian department applicants. Proving a minimum competence in the language should not hamper the minority students' chances of getting accepted. Further, the Georgian language scores do not have an impact on the prospective student's chances of getting state funding for education. The Georgian state sets a maximum threshold for state university annual fees but has no influence on private ones. Within this amount, the state provides four grant packages for outstanding students – 100%, 70%, 50%, and 20% for all four years of undergraduate study. Students are awarded funding based upon the scores of the general abilities test only. Given the fact that this test can be taken both in Georgian and in Russian, it creates a fairly level playing ground for all students.

Still, the minority advocates argue that option of Russian language tests does not adequately meet the needs of minority applicants whose native language is not Russian or whose education was not in Russian. Lately the idea of opening an Armenian-language university in Samtskhe-Javakheti has been promoted by the government of Armenia. But the Georgian side has rejected the idea on the grounds that ethnic Armenians or other minorities are not disadvantaged by the Georgian education system.

The Ministry already supports special preparatory courses in the Georgian language for minorities to prepare them for the UNE and pays a stipend of 100 GEL to participants.¹⁰ It should be noted that the number of minority students entering Georgian universities has declined since the introduction of the UNE three years ago, now that requirements of Georgian language knowledge are not smoothed over by the universities. However, the Ministry of Education officials argue that throughout the last three years the number of national minority students has been increasing. At the same time, they reaffirm that there will be no 'positive discrimination' to benefit minorities and reject any form of quotas, eased requirements, or special exams. The argument is that there will be no discrimination – including positive – because the measures adopted temporarily will be hard to abolish upon their intended end.

The Ministry of Education has made efforts to improve Georgian teaching in minority-language schools. The state budget funds the programme for creating textbooks for teaching Georgian as a second language. Two books for beginner levels have already been published and are part of the curriculum. This "Tavtavi" series will eventually provide material for all 12 grades. Deputy Minister Bela Tsipuria maintains that the methodology is compatible with the European Commission recommendations in the field, however visible challenges remain. For example, the first (absolute beginner) book does not include a section on the

¹⁰Kvrvishvili, Ana. "Lomaia: No Chance for Armenian-Language University in Samtskhe-Javakheti" *The Messenger* August 23, 2007



Georgian alphabet and pronunciation and is monolingual Georgian. This, Tsipuria argues, was appropriate because the teachers can independently teach students to write and read in Georgian. Yet this claim does not seem to be well grounded given the realities in the non-Georgian language schools and the levels of Georgian knowledge of both the students and teachers. Here it is worth remembering that Georgian alphabet is not similar to any other in the world, including the Armenian, Latin, or Cyrillic that is native to most of the minorities, and would require special instruction.

The Ministry of Education has no intention at this time to introduce bilingual education programs, be it through multilingual textbooks or outright multilingual classes. The Ministry acknowledges that these approaches may be an option, but they neither plan to employ them, nor rule out doing so in the future. However, Tsipuria says that there is a school initiated movement towards this end, with about 20 bilingual classes already operating in Kvemo Kartli. This experiment was started at the schools' own initiative¹¹ and the Ministry so far has no intention to extend this experience nationwide or contribute to its implementation in interested schools.

Another grassroots development is the school partnership within the country, operational since 2004. Tsipuria says that schools from minority-populated areas team up with schools from predominantly Georgian areas to implement special projects, like joint excursions, etc. This initiative aims at strengthening human interaction to counter the isolation of the minority-populated regions and provide an opportunity for inter-group socialisation at an earlier age. In addition to this, some language benefit can also be derived from the encounters, but probably to a much lesser extent. Although Ms. Tsipuria described this initiative as a grassroots movement, with which Ministry was not involved, we have encountered elsewhere in the Ministry documents that budgetary funds of GEL 10.000 has been assigned for the school partnership program.

The Language Policy

The Georgian language has had a dominant role in defining the Georgian nation and nationalism. Language is one of the three components of “fatherland, language, and faith” – Ilia Chavchavadze’s¹² understanding of what it means to be Georgian. To illustrate, descendants of Georgians living on the territories occupied by the Ottoman Empire centuries ago—devote Muslims and loyal citizens of Turkey—are still mostly considered Georgian, since they have maintained the Georgian language and culture. Even during Soviet times, when Russian replaced local languages in most of the member republics and acquired the status of the official language, Georgia fiercely resisted the attempts to legalise Russian. Georgian has not been challenged as the only language of the country since the Russian empire. Therefore the commitment of ratifying and enforcing the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages is largely seen as a threat and is dismissed both by the government and opposition representatives alike. Although its ratification was one of the promises Georgia made while joining the Council of Europe in 1999, opponents of the Charter like to point to other states long members of CE and EU, like the Baltic three and France who despite the same pledge have so far refrained from adopting it.

Although the Georgian constitution stipulates that both Georgian and Abkhazian shall be the state language on the territory of Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia (currently outside the control of the Tbilisi authorities), there is hardly anyone in the country that would support establishing Armenian and Azeri as the state language in the appropriate regions. Nonetheless, in reality, Armenian and Azeri are largely used instead of Georgian as the working language even in government institutions.

¹¹ Correspondingly, the novelty is funded by the schools themselves, without assistance by the Ministry or other outside donors.

¹² Ilia Chavchavadze was a famous writer and the leader of 19th century Georgian national awakening.



Perhaps the only exception from this is the judiciary. Court hearings are conducted in Georgian only, to the locals' objection, but with translation and interpretation services provided by the state. The minorities are pushing for formalising the use of minority languages, as they are the most convenient and cost effective. This idea of giving official status to Armenian and Azeri languages in the areas mostly populated by these minorities is supported by several non-governmental organisations,¹³ which stress that such arrangements can be made temporarily. The argument is that at least some time needs to be given to the local populations to adjust and acquire Georgian language skills, and in the meantime their language could legally be used for official communication both locally and with the central authorities. But the government argues that such temporary fixes would only protract the amount of time it takes national minorities to embrace the national language and would not alleviate the situation. Further, the argument goes, once given such a possibility, the minorities would again feel deprived and discriminated against when the period came to an end.

Elene Tevdoradze, Chair of the Parliamentary Human Rights and Civic Integration Committee, says that Georgia will probably not sign the Charter or change the existing legislation on language policy until Georgia's territorial integrity is restored. If Abkhazia and South Ossetia come under Tbilisi's control, the government would definitely have to look for new arrangements when defining their status, including language issues. But still, few believe that any changes would be applied to the status of other minority languages.

Georgian Language for Adults

Regarding the provision of Georgian language training for adults the state does not have any general programmes. There is a programme that trains school teachers and head masters in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti, which is supported by the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities. Perhaps most importantly, the state-run Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration in Kutaisi accepts citizens from minority and mountainous areas and provides them with special training, including three-month long intensive Georgian language courses for minorities, to improve their employment prospects in the public service. The School generally targets those already in the Georgian civil service for retraining, but accepts other candidates as well. This state-run institution is commended by the experts in the field, however concern remains that the graduates' employment rate is not very high. While Deputy Education Minister Tsipuria regards the 30-40% employment rate¹⁴ as quite high, Elene Tevdoradze, Chair of the Parliamentary Human Rights and Civic Integration Committee, believes that the graduates do not necessarily need to be working for the government and should rather focus on employment in the private sector.

While the government claims that allowing equal opportunities for all, it does not provide the older generation, which is already disadvantaged by the old system, adequate resources to catch up with the majority population and compete on equal ground. The starting conditions may be better now for the generation of national minorities that is just now starting school, but those caught in between, i.e. those already in the upper grades of public school, young adults, and older people remain deprived. Unfortunately, the latter group constitutes the majority of the national minority population.

Problem of Isolation

The language problems of the minorities have a universal bearing on their civil rights. The right of access to information is greatly hindered because of language. As mentioned above, minorities are largely detached

¹³ NGOs such as "Multinational Georgia" and ECMI are viewed as being in favour of such arrangements. Representatives of "Multinational Georgia" could not be reached for the purposes of this report.

¹⁴ This employment figure is based on anecdotal evidence only. Reliable/official data is currently not gathered.



from the Georgian information sphere. Georgian Public Broadcasting (GPB) on weekdays has daily news programme in five minority languages (Russian, Armenian, Azeri, Ossetian, and Abkhazian), but this means that each group gets news in its native language only once a week. Hence, these programs cannot possibly be very informative or enable the viewers to get a clear picture of the developments in the country. While a daily Russian language news programme was proposed by several organisations to remedy this problem, the waning Russian skills among national minorities arguably would not allow for better impact either.

The leadership of GPB is well aware of the limited influence its efforts produce and is open to suggestions for a more workable scheme. However there is no clear consensus within the minority communities above to improve the situation. Providing subtitles for Georgian language programs, one idea considered, is a challenge, Mr. Tarkhnishvili,¹⁵ Chair of the Board of Trustees explains, since there is no agreement among Azeris about the script for the subtitles. While modern Azeri language uses Latin script, during the Soviet times Cyrillic was used instead and the Azeris living in Georgia are more familiar with this way of writing. But using Cyrillic would be problematic in terms of violating official language norms.

Mr. Tarkhnishvili argues that better representation of minorities themselves in the mainstream Georgian media could be a good starting point. He believes that in addition to minorities being taught Georgian and integrated into Georgian society, Georgians themselves need greater exposure to minorities in order to understand and appreciate them. A weekly TV talk show, called “Italian Courtyard”¹⁶ that has been on the air since June is aimed at precisely this. The programme focuses on the issues of multiculturalism. The show’s themes thus far have included: the role of women, national cuisines, national costumes, wedding traditions, stereotypes, mixed families, employment in the regions, etc. Another aspect of the public education campaign about minorities is the documentaries and social ads that depict ethnic histories and their role in Georgian history. So, along with the talk show format, the programme also airs short features about minority individuals.

GPB is not the only national media recently devoting time and attention to minority issues. Commercial Imedi TV, in cooperation with the Horizonti Foundation, ran a weekly talk show called “My Country” that focused on minority issues. The number of shows was limited, only four, and focused on four different topics: citizenship, cultural diversity, Georgian language teaching, and integration of minorities in social and economic life.

While national media outlets continue deliberations on how to better communicate with national minorities, local attempts are being made in Armenian populated areas to bring Georgian current affairs close to home. OSCE funding has enabled two local independent TV stations to air news programmes accompanied by simultaneous translation into Armenian.¹⁷ While such undertakings may be quite costly, they indeed are a good opportunity to fill the information gap.

One way to integrate the minorities could be by strengthening the local bureaus of GPB. This remains a priority for the organisation, but is slow going due to financial constraints and the shortage of resources. Another unresolved issue is the extent of coverage. Tarkhnishvili explains that the GPB signal fails to reach not only minority areas, but also the remote ethnic Georgian areas of Svaneti and Racha-Lechkhumi,

¹⁵ Since the time of his interview for this report Mr. Tarkhnishvili has left his position with Georgian Public Broadcasting and was appointed Chair of the Central Election Commission of Georgia.

¹⁶ The show is created in cooperation with United Nations Association Georgia and USAID. Residential buildings with an inner courtyard characteristic of old part of Tbilisi are popularly called Italian Courtyards. They are closely associated with traditional multiculturalism and good neighbourly relations of old Tbilisi. The programme’s web page http://www.gpb.ge/st_1_5.php?lang=eng&tm_id=1&sub_id=1 also provides an overview in Georgian of the content of previous shows.

¹⁷ <http://www.osce.org/item/24498.html>



underscoring that this technicality is not an ethnic bias. When these technical problems are settled, GPB plans to revive the old tradition of radio and TV language-learning programs.¹⁸

GPB is not alone in its plans to design self teaching language aids. The Office of the State Minister on Civic Integration reports it is also involved in producing manuals and CDs that would be accessible for those interested in the minority populated areas. It remains to be seen how effective CDs will be in the regions marred by poverty and underdevelopment.

Policy Formulation – the Attempted Strategies and Shortcomings

Formulating a coherent minority policy has been on the government agenda, at least formally, for years. While there is no single comprehensive document adopted thus far, several drafts and ideas have already been developed, albeit some quite contradictory.

One important signal was the parliamentary action while ratifying the Framework Convention on National Minorities. The Convention was signed in 2000 and ratified in 2005 by parliamentary resolution. While Georgia did not formally make any derogations or declarations, as attested by the official web page¹⁹ of the Convention Secretariat, Article 2 of the resolution shows a different picture. The resolution defines what a “national minority” means in Georgia – the term, according to it, applies to a group of persons who: are citizens of Georgia; differ from the majority of the population in terms of their linguistic, cultural, and ethnic identity; have inhabited the territory of Georgia for an extensive period of time; and are compactly settled on the Georgian territory. Further definitions and derogations concern Articles 10, 11.1, 11.3, 16, 18, and 30. Article 3 of the resolution states that the declarations given in Article 2 “are an inseparable part” of the ratification decision. However this latter statement can easily be challenged. Georgian legislation provides for supremacy of international treaties to which Georgia is a signatory over domestic law, which includes acts of parliament. Since the definitions and declarations were not officially applied to the Convention by the Georgian side, the definitions provided by the resolution can only be assumed to be part of domestic law. But since they contradict international law, they should constitutionally be made void. Hence, the content of the resolution does not possess any legal power whatsoever. Experts in the field largely consider it to be an attempt by Parliament to at least declare its own stance and make it known. But the use of such assertion remains unclear.

Another document prepared in Parliament, by the Committee of Human Rights Protection and Civic Integration, is the draft Concept for Protection and Integration of National Minorities.²⁰ The document itself, although aimed at protecting minorities and contributing to their well being, is not devoid of the spirit of fear and mistrust of minorities. The Concept demands “strict compliance” in terms of: the inviolability of Georgia’s territorial integrity, minorities’ adherence to Georgian legislation, and not undermining state security, among others. Further, minorities explicitly are to respect Georgian and Abkhazian people, history, and traditions as well as other minorities. Although the document vows to reject forced assimilation attempts, it also states that the state may in some cases contribute to their integration into Georgian society. While minorities will be granted opportunities to learn their own language, good knowledge of Georgian is a “necessary prerequisite” for their integration. Further, the concept stipulates that minorities have a right for meaningful participation in deciding issues concerning them. But imagining issues that do not concern

¹⁸ Until the mid-1990s Georgian state radio and TV ran programmes for learning foreign languages: usually Russian, English, German, and French, and also programmes on proper Georgian and grammar. This time around Georgian language classes would probably be devoted more attention.

¹⁹ http://www.coe.int/T/E/Human_Rights/Minorities

²⁰ The English version of the document is available at the Committee web page at: http://www.parliament.ge/files/603_8080_187110_concepcia_en.pdf



minorities as a component of Georgian society is a difficult task. It is probably due to this biased attitude, insiders say, that this Concept still remains a draft and is largely disregarded in the process of policy elaboration.

The Tolerance and Civic Integration Council²¹ created in August 2005 is the main body in charge of this process of policy elaboration. It works closely with the United Nations Association Georgia (UNAG) in implementing its own four-year National Integration and Tolerance in Georgia programme. As Mr. Tarkhnishvili, who has served as a member of the Council, says, this helps avoid duplicating efforts. The assessment survey report recently published by UNAG²² reaffirmed what was already well known, he says. However, there still is no consensus on many key issues even within the Council. What is agreed on is that there should be no affirmative action, a.k.a. positive discrimination. The Tbilisi head of the European Centre for National Minorities (ECMI) argues that wrongly equating affirmative action with (a form of) discrimination will not prove beneficial. There is no common view on the need for a law on minorities or state language, as well as on how to define minorities. The definition proposed by the draft Concept of the Human Rights Committee is clearly dismissed, but the question is lingering whether rights should be somehow tied to numbers or not.

Regarding the language issues Tarkhnishvili believes that the Charter is not quite tailored to Georgia's present needs. He explains that the Charter is more applicable to the situation where integration is no more an issue and preserving minority identities is more problematic. In Georgia, though both questions are equally pressing, integration and ending mutual isolation is the top priority. Although many note that concerning protection and provision of formal, legal rights of minorities the situation in Georgia is not bad at all, their integration is a different story. But related to this is another concern – while the state tries to promote Georgian language and culture within minority communities as a means for their integration, so far it shows little understanding of communication being a two-way street. Still limited efforts are made to disperse the fear of “Georgianisation” expressed by minorities.

Considerations for the Future

Overall, the current Georgian leadership better recognises the urgency of a comprehensive policy towards national minorities compared to previous governments. However, there are no tangible outcomes yet. The state's inability to thus far formulate a coherent and comprehensible policy reflects the contradictory attitude of the Georgian public, which supports the fair treatment of national minorities, while remaining suspicious towards them. This mistrust is not associated with the majority population only. Easing this mutual anxiety should be the starting point for successful integration beneficial to all communities and the state as a whole.

This integration process cannot succeed without taking into account the grievances that the minority communities justly have. Systematic and coherent approaches must be employed to address the language problems of the minorities. The state has a responsibility to provide all citizens with adequate opportunities to learn the state language and must take steps to fulfil this responsibility. It must be understood that this is an important prerequisite for the meaningful engagement of a significant part of the Georgian population in civic and economic life of the country. As president Saakashvili likes to stress when talking with or about minorities, Georgia cannot afford not taking advantage of the resources and promises these people have to

²¹ The Council was put in charge of producing the first State Report on the Framework Convention due in April 2007. The Report has been submitted and is available at: http://www.coe.int/t/e/human_rights/minorities/Country_specific_eng.asp#P315_16467

²² Unfortunately UNAG has not made full text of the document available online. However we can provide an electronic copy upon request.



offer. This message needs to be understood well both by the state and the minority communities as well. Minorities too need to be explained the opportunities that will come with better knowledge of the state language and intensified efforts from their side to actively engage with the rest of the country. Only after establishing workable conditions for dialogue can the alienated communities come to terms with their differences and similarities and establish a truly pluralistic society.

The minorities themselves need to be involved in the process of elaborating the integration strategy. While the government-initiated bodies are abundant, they are largely dysfunctional. Usually minority groups are present within these groups, but are mostly represented by NGOs from the capital. Although these organisations/persons are legitimate actors, being based in Tbilisi and better integrated urban areas, they may not have sufficient ties with the regions to adequately convey their grievances and interests. Revitalisation of the existing mechanisms is needed to ensure that regional voices are heard.

Another problem that needs to be addressed is that of consistency – in minority policy in general and regarding the language teaching policy in particular. While donor-driven efforts have predated the state involvement and have provided new opportunities, they have tended to be quite patchy, with programmes running for a year or two only. Long-term commitment and coherent programmes are needed to ensure sustainable and meaningful results.

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