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Georgia's Minorities: Breaking Down Barriers to Integration

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This article is the fourth of five in a series for the Future of Georgia project run by Carnegie Europe and the Levan Mikeladze Foundation analyzing contentious issues in Georgian society.

Georgia is a multilingual and multiethnic country. According to the [2014 census](#), ethnic Georgians make up about 87 percent of the total population, while other ethnic groups constitute 13 percent. Within these groups, Azerbaijanis account for just over 6 percent of Georgia's population and Armenians almost 5 percent.

The legacy of Soviet ethno-linguistic policies leaves a strong mark and is a major reason why both Georgians and ethnic minorities find it difficult to view themselves as members of a single, united civic nation-state.

Integrating Georgia's minorities into the country's political, economic, and cultural life is essential for successful nation-building. This will require a shift in state policies on language, education, and economic development as well as a change of mindset among the many ethnic Georgians who have little exposure to compatriots from minority backgrounds.

MINORITIES IN MODERN GEORGIA

Ethnicity in the Soviet Union was institutionalized. Following Josef Stalin's rule, the so-called titular nations—Georgians, Armenians, Russians, and so on—whose names defined the fifteen union republics of the Soviet Union virtually viewed these entities as their own possessions and discriminated against other ethnicities. Language was a central component of an ethno-national policy in which minorities enjoyed fewer rights than majority populations.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the fifteen republics became independent states. Newly independent Georgia faced a challenge in constructing a new civic national identity. Although all Georgian residents automatically obtained Georgian citizenship, minorities could not fully participate in state life.

Modern Georgia's minorities are very diverse. They include Russians, Greeks, Kurds, Yezidis, Assyrians, Jews, and Ukrainians. Kists—the ethnic kin of the Chechens of the North Caucasus—live in the eastern region of Kakheti but make up only 7 percent of the



region's population. Four regions of Georgia, where minorities live compactly in large numbers, are worthy of special attention: [Abkhazia](#); [South Ossetia](#); Kvemo Kartli, with its large Azerbaijani population; and Samtskhe-Javakheti, with its big Armenian population.

Kvemo Kartli borders Azerbaijan and Samtskhe-Javakheti adjoins Armenia, politicizing the status of the Azerbaijanis and Armenians living there. While some Georgians worry about a potential threat of separatism and disloyalty toward the Georgian state, the minorities often see Georgian assimilation as a threat to their ethnic identities. Fear of assimilation, especially in the Armenian community, and a lack of support from ethnic Georgians lead these minorities to seek that support in the historical homelands of their ethnic kin.

Despite holding Georgian passports, many Azerbaijanis and Armenians in these two regions also consider themselves citizens of Azerbaijan and Armenia, respectively. In Samtskhe-Javakheti, most men travel to Russia during the summer to work there as seasonal migrants. As a result, a large part of the region's population has both Georgian and Russian passports, and many of them hold Armenian passports as well.

Nevertheless, numerous studies and surveys have confirmed that minorities—even if they feel alienated from Tbilisi—aspire to be loyal citizens of Georgia and perceive the country as their homeland. In a [2009 study](#), in answer to the question “What does it mean to be a citizen of Georgia?” overwhelming majorities of Azerbaijanis (84 percent) and Armenians (87 percent) answered, “Living in the homeland.” However, when asked whether they were actively involved in Georgia's state and political life, almost no Azerbaijanis responded positively. Among ethnic Armenians, political involvement was high.

The findings of a September 2020 [survey by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers](#) (CRRC), commissioned by Carnegie Europe and the Levan Mikeladze Foundation

for the Future of Georgia project, confirm continuing high levels of loyalty by minorities toward the state. Only 16 percent of respondents declared that their ethnicity was more important than their Georgian citizenship, while 67 percent identified more with the latter (see figure 1). A further 15 percent of the Georgian population said that both identities were equally important to them.

PERSISTENT ETHNO-NATIONALISM

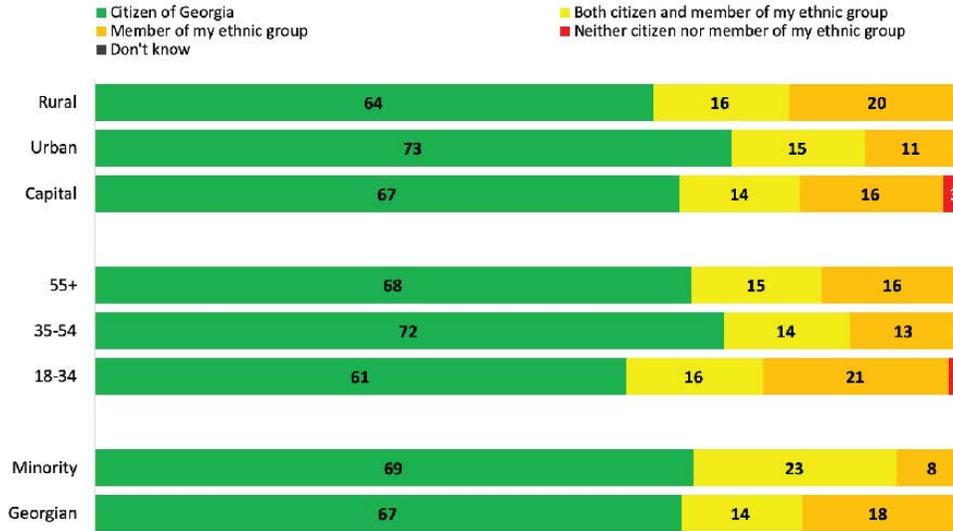
Ethno-nationalist tendencies are strong both among minorities and among ethnic Georgians. The identities of the majority and of minorities are heavily shaped by ethno-territorial claims in the distant past and the way history was taught in the Soviet Union. Some ethnic Georgians worry about demographic trends among Azerbaijanis—a continuation of a Soviet-era narrative in which Georgian nationalists expressed fears of life-threatening expansion by Muslims. In the case of Armenians, some Georgians fear claims over Georgian territory and cultural heritage.

The CRRC survey shows that a sense of modern Georgian citizenship has been consolidated, as almost all residents of Georgia said they were proud to be Georgian citizens (see figure 2). However, an ethnic conception of citizenship is still strong: half of those polled believed that Georgian citizens should be Orthodox Christians—a category that excludes almost all Armenians, Azerbaijanis, and Kists—and a significant minority of 30 percent believed that only ethnic Georgians should be allowed citizenship.

Many also perceive language as an essential attribute for Georgian citizenship. Ninety-two percent of those surveyed thought that Georgian citizens should speak Georgian. Ninety-four percent also thought that members of ethnic minorities who want to work in the civil service should be required to know the Georgian language.

FIGURE 1
Georgians' Attitudes Toward Identity

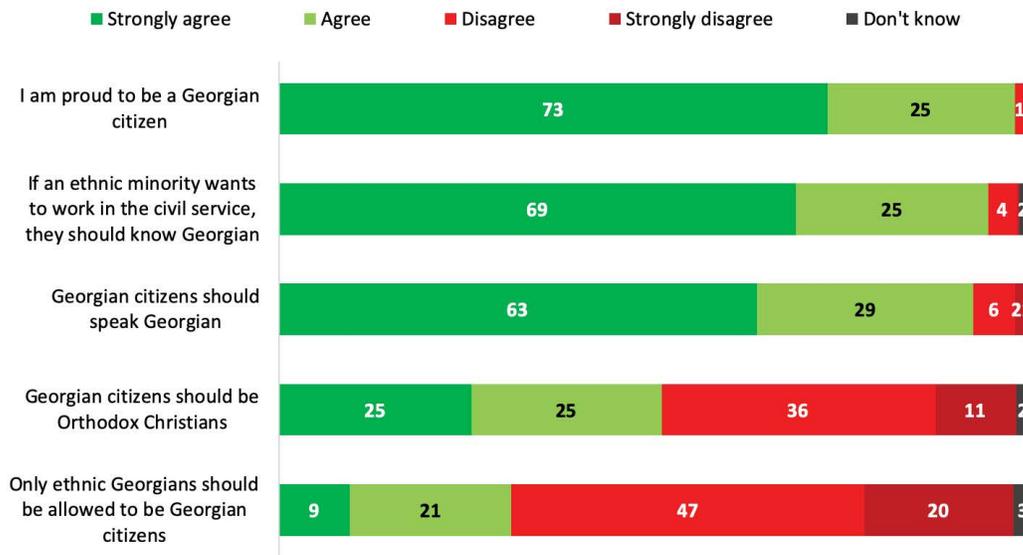
Which of the following identities is most important to you?



SOURCE: September 2020 Carnegie-Mikeldadze survey (by CRRC).

FIGURE 2
Georgians' Attitudes Toward Ethnicity

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about ethnicity in Georgia?



SOURCE: September 2020 Carnegie-Mikeldadze survey (by CRRC).



The persistent strength of ethno-nationalism in Georgia can be attributed both to the legacy of Soviet totalitarianism and to a Georgian nationalist tradition that developed in the nineteenth century when Georgia was colonized by the Russian Empire and reemerged in the **national liberation struggle in the late 1980s**. This intellectual tradition emphasized three combined components that underlie Georgian identity: homeland, language, and religion.

The survey also revealed contradictory views among ethnic Georgians toward minorities. These views can be seen through the prism of public attitudes to the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia that broke out in the early 1990s. The conflicts demonstrated that othering and creating an enemy image of minorities can have terrible consequences. As a result, 69 percent of respondents held tolerant attitudes toward Abkhaz and Ossetians, yet at the same time, 47 percent perceived ethnic minorities as a potential threat (see figure 3).

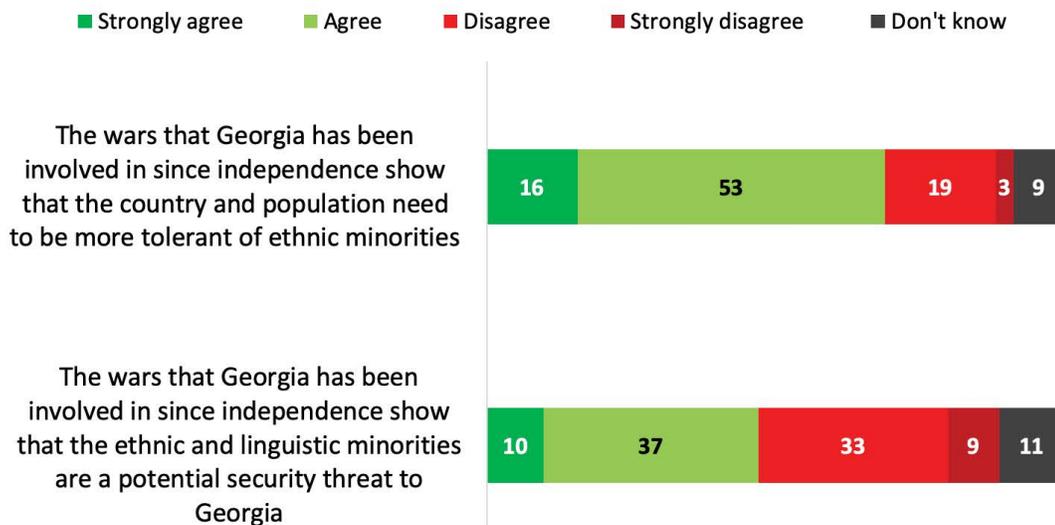
Contemporary Georgia has a low level of what American sociologist Milton Bennett calls “**intercultural sensitivity**”—an awareness of the cultures and concerns of other groups. Studies show that this applies to all types of minorities. According to Bennett’s intercultural sensitivity model, ethnic Georgians are mostly in the ethnocentric phase, in which they minimize the differences of others and, for the most part, do not recognize minorities as full members of their state.

Religion is another marker of difference. Historically in Georgia, religion was seen to determine ethnicity. Ethnic Georgians who were baptized into the Armenian Apostolic or Gregorian Church were considered Armenians, while Georgian Catholics in southern Georgia were called “French.” All Muslims, regardless of their origin—Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran, or Turkey—were considered Gypsies.

In modern Georgia, around 83 percent of the population belongs to the Georgian Orthodox Church. Most Armenians belong to the Armenian Apostolic

FIGURE 3
Georgians’ Views on Ethnic Minorities

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about ethnicity in Georgia?



SOURCE: September 2020 Carnegie-Mikeladze survey (by CRRC).

Church, while Azerbaijanis and a significant minority of Georgians practice Islam. Yet the ethnic background of Muslims is largely irrelevant; Georgian and non-Georgian followers of Islam are both discriminated against, for the most part by Georgian Orthodox Christians.

Current legislation in Georgia is liberal when it comes to the construction of religious and sacred buildings. Nevertheless, local governments often refuse to issue building permits to religious groups, or delay doing so, on discriminatory grounds.

By contrast, the Georgian Orthodox Church has a special legal status in Georgia under the constitution. The church generally receives preferential treatment compared with other religious communities, which the latter see as a sign of inequality. Naturally, this unequal approach does not help create a secular environment and therefore impedes the integration of minorities.

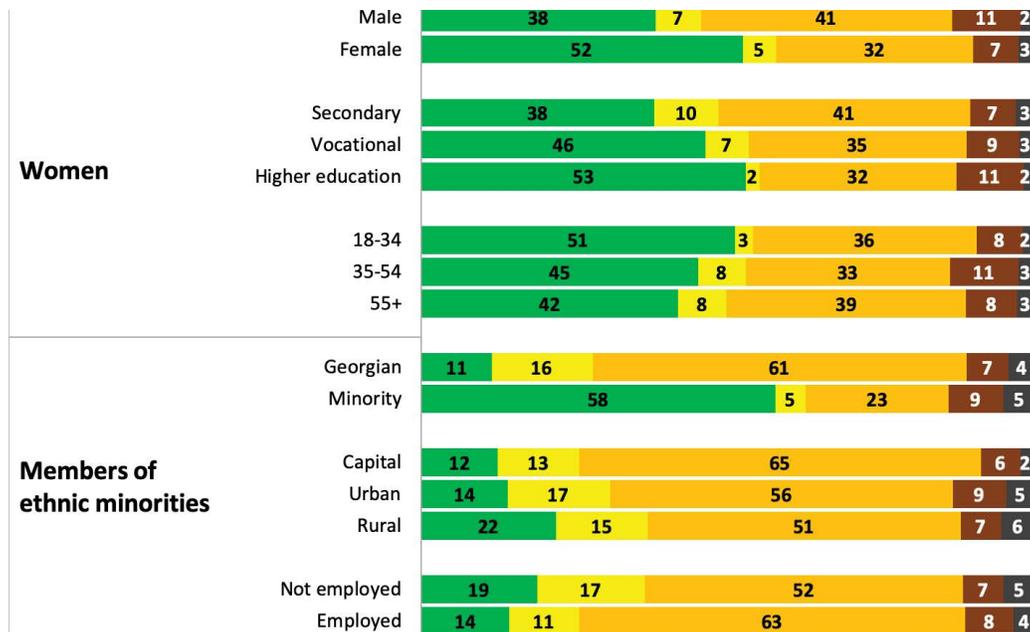
GOVERNMENT POLICIES ON MINORITIES: INTENTIONS AND REALITIES

The integration of ethnic minorities into Georgian society remains a slow process, despite repeated declarations by the government that work is under way. Although Georgia has made progress in building a democratic state in the last two decades, the foundations of sustainable democratic institutions are still weak. Minority communities' distrust of state political institutions and the weaknesses of those institutions lead to alienation and isolation. The CRRC poll also found that most Georgians do not perceive women and ethnic minorities to be underrepresented in the national parliament (see figure 4).

Arguably, the most important challenge the government faces is how to both protect the cultural heritage of minorities and fully integrate them into the Georgian

FIGURE 4
Georgians' Attitudes Toward Representation in the Georgian Parliament

There are twenty-one women and eleven members of ethnic minorities in Georgia's 150-member parliament. Do you think this is too few or too many?



SOURCE: September 2020 Carnegie-Mikeldadze survey (by CRRC).



cultural space. The Ministry of Education and Science is funding and implementing several practical projects aimed at preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of ethnic minorities. However, less attention is paid to familiarizing Georgians with the cultures and traditions of minorities.

In 2005, Tbilisi established an institutional approach to the civic integration of ethnic minorities. In line with the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, Georgia developed a policy to respect the ethnic identities of minorities and create appropriate conditions for the realization of their rights. In 2009, the government published the National Concept of Tolerance and Civic Integration and an action plan for 2009–2014, which defined the state's approach to civic integration. And in 2015, ministers approved the State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration and an action plan for 2015–2020. The government is currently working on a 2021–2030 strategy and action plan. These action plans are among the most crucial tools in the country's civic integration policy.

Democratic institutions in Georgia are so undeveloped that legislation frequently exists only on paper and mechanisms for enforcing laws are weak or do not exist at all. Therefore, even if a law is ideal, its execution and enforcement remain questionable. Monitoring by civil society is needed to trace the shortcomings in this process, formulate recommendations, and work with the relevant authorities.

Language Policy

Language policy is crucial for effective integration. Members of Georgia's minority communities often speak Georgian poorly, and their own languages receive only partial recognition in public civic settings. Linguistic divisions date back to the Soviet period. As a tool to protect themselves from the language policy of the Soviet Union, small nations prioritized language in

the building of their identities. And because the Soviet Union did not recognize religion, language acquired an even greater importance. Although the status of Georgian as the language of the republic was established in Georgia's 1978 constitution, Russian was favored as an instrument of law, science, and interethnic relations. This is still reflected today in the low levels of Georgian-language proficiency in ethnic-minority areas.

Among the language policies proposed for Georgia's ethnic-minority communities, providing government services in minority languages had the highest approval rating among Georgians surveyed in the CRRC poll (see figure 5). Meanwhile, respondents were more skeptical toward the ideas of having street signs in minority languages and allowing certain court cases to be carried out in these languages.

Language education needs much more government attention. There are currently [208 non-Georgian-language public schools in Georgia](#) as well as 89 non-Georgian-language sections in schools that use Russian, Armenian, or Azerbaijani as the language of instruction. A total of almost 52,000 pupils study in these non-Georgian-language schools and sections.

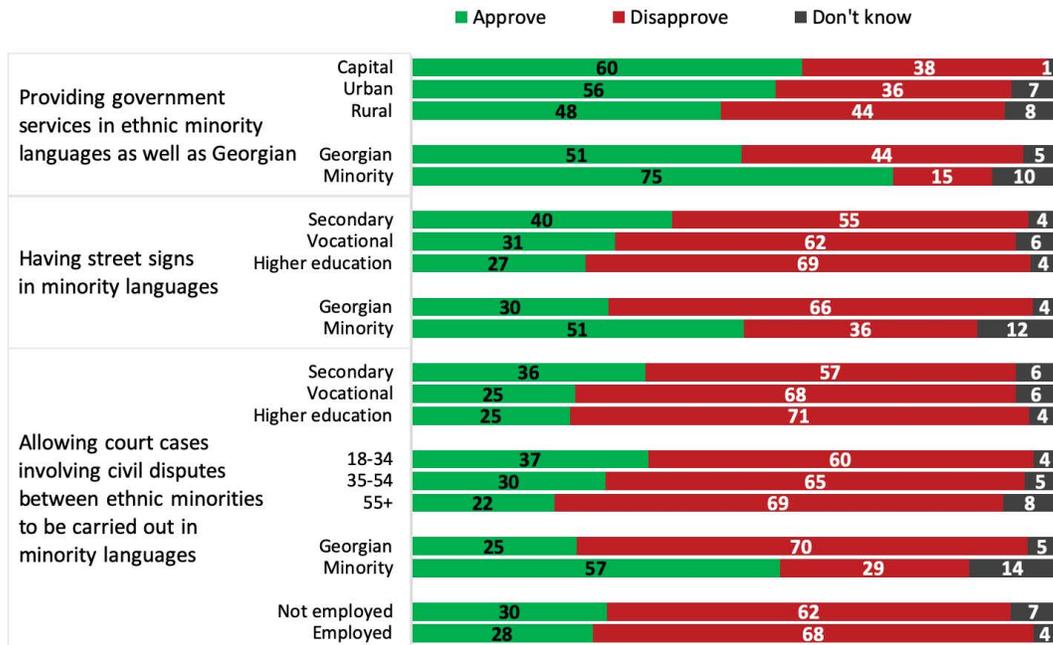
The main issue is a lack of teacher qualifications in non-Georgian-language schools. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there have been practically no programs in Georgian higher-education institutions to train teachers for these schools. As a result, the average age of teachers is very high: more than 60 percent are of [retirement age](#). This problem, combined with insufficient translation of textbooks, adversely affects the quality of education in non-Georgian-language public schools.

Local and international surveys show extremely low levels of Georgian-language proficiency among non-Georgian-language school graduates, a problem that the government needs to address as a matter of urgency. Since 2006, the education ministry has been implementing various projects to support the teaching

FIGURE 5

Georgians' Views on Minority Language Policies

Would you approve or disapprove of the following policies in Georgia's ethnic-minority communities?



SOURCE: September 2020 Carnegie-Mikeladze survey (by CRRC).

of Georgian as a second language in non-Georgian-language schools. However, the success rates of these projects are quite low.

It is worth mentioning a notable exception among these projects: the **affirmative action policy**, also known as the 1+4 program, which the Georgian government has been running since 2010. Under this program, a quota is allocated for **non-Georgian-language students**, who study the Georgian language for one year and then their desired four-year undergraduate programs without exams.

The program has had several positive outcomes, which have raised the quality of education received by minorities in Georgian higher-education institutions. Trust in these institutions has increased, and there is hope that young

people will find employment in Georgia after finishing higher education. The number of young people who can continue their education in the Georgian language has also risen. A change in the law to allow minorities to pass a general skills test in their mother tongue has given young people more motivation to receive a higher education. The non-Georgian-speaking population has become more aware of these changes. There are already examples of successful participants in the program, who are studying in Georgian higher-education institutions.

To ensure effective teaching of the Georgian language while preserving minority languages, the education ministry has launched a multilingual education reform to replace the monolingual teaching model and include Georgian as an additional language of instruction in non-Georgian-language schools.



However, various problems—an inflexible curriculum, scheduling issues, and low salaries—have emerged during the implementation process that make it difficult for schools to adapt to new models. In particular, the introduction of the multilingual education model implies the integration of language and subject matter in lessons such as mathematics and science. This leads to changes in lesson schedules and adjustments of the curriculum, requiring teachers to make additional efforts. To properly motivate and interest educators, the government needs to raise their salaries. The state does not seem ready for these changes yet, although the first steps are being taken in the form of pilot projects.

Socioeconomic Issues

Socioeconomic issues are also central to the inequalities faced by Georgia's ethnic minorities. Although Georgian law nominally protects the socioeconomic equality of all citizens, representatives of minority groups still face big hurdles in realizing their economic rights and gaining full access to social services.

Economic activity in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti is much slower than in the rapidly growing capital, Tbilisi. Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti are predominantly agricultural regions and together account for more than [half of Georgia's potato crop](#). Wheat and corn are grown in the lowlands of Kvemo Kartli, and both regions also have livestock.

The Georgian government has launched socioeconomic programs to help integrate ethnic minorities into the national economy. However, the main emphasis so far has been on information campaigns, for example to provide advice for ethnic minorities in Kakheti, Kvemo Kartli, and Samtskhe-Javakheti about various state programs to support agricultural cooperatives.

The government has also taken measures to support the development and employment opportunities of young people living in the regions. The Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs founded the Regional School

of Entrepreneurship within the framework of the Youth Entrepreneurial Competence Development Program. A 2018 training course for women in Kvemo Kartli on how to start and develop a company was seen as an incentive for them to go into private business. Unfortunately, this is the current limit of support measures, and this needs to be corrected.

Unemployment remains a big problem among Georgia's ethnic minorities. They face problems in gaining employment in many sectors, including public service. To increase access to the public administration for young people from ethnic minority backgrounds, in 2017 the Georgian government gave students from ethnic minorities the opportunity to gain relevant experience and develop professional skills by pursuing internships in public bodies. The Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration, opened in 2006 in Kutaisi, provides short- and long-term vocational education programs for public servants throughout Georgia. However, the school's graduates are frequently overlooked, and jobs are offered to other candidates with little or no knowledge of the Georgian language and few professional skills.

CONCLUSION AND PRIORITY AREAS FOR ACTION

Georgia's ethnic minorities declare the country to be their homeland and say they are not alienated from the idea of Georgian statehood as a general principle. This is a positive phenomenon, yet the participation of minorities in the public and political spheres remains extremely limited. The alienation of Georgia's minorities from the rest of society is exacerbated by limited opportunities for trade and economic interaction, while relations among ethnic groups in Georgia are determined largely by group superstitions and stereotypes formed in the Soviet period.

Successful civic nation-building in Georgia entails the integration of minorities into the country's political, economic, and cultural life. It also requires a change of

attitude among a vast number of ethnic Georgians who have little or no interaction with their fellow citizens from minority backgrounds and still harbor prejudices about them.

State policy needs to change in several key areas if the situation is to improve.

The language barrier between speakers of Georgian and of minority languages is often regarded as the main driver of the alienation of ethnic minorities. Proficiency in Georgian is an important tool of communication and essential for professional development, although language proficiency alone is not enough to eradicate ethno-isolationism.

The education system should make knowledge of the Georgian language accessible to ethnic minorities and, at the same time, ensure the protection of minority languages. To do this, the state must maximize the potential of local staff by offering training programs to support Georgian-language teaching and the professional development of teachers. The general system of education should ensure the upbringing of all Georgian citizens and not advantage any one group over another.

Even more important is the development of sustainable democratic institutions. Georgia must achieve an environment in which the state takes the interests of each individual into consideration and better protects the principle of meritocracy. Alongside this, local self-government should be promoted and strengthened. This would encourage citizens to become involved in local politics as well as help protect their cultural identity.

The ministries of education and culture, with the involvement of international donors and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), should

encourage intercultural educational projects to represent the positive and influential roles of minorities in the historical development of Georgia.

In regions densely populated by minorities, it is important to ensure the development of and support for fields and sectors specific to those regions. This includes promoting private initiatives in the agricultural sector and increasing the number of agricultural processing enterprises in the agrarian regions of Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti. It is also advisable to promote and develop industrial centers in these regions to create jobs and encourage economic activity.

The education and culture ministries, again with international donors and NGOs, should launch a broad public relations campaign to raise awareness among the majority community of the cultures, traditions, and values of minorities. This would help overcome alienation and make society much more receptive to different cultures.

Finally, and importantly, the state should pay more attention to taking practical steps to establish a strategy toward minorities to ensure their full and equal involvement in Georgia's political and social life.

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