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Sordia, Giorgi

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Challenges of Minority Governance and Political Participation in Georgia

By Giorgi Sordia, Tbilisi

Abstract

This article discusses state policies towards national minorities in Georgia. It explores the institutional framework of minority governance and identifies the main challenges the state is facing in the process of civil integration and participation of minorities. The analysis also assesses the National Concept on Tolerance and Civil Integration and Action Plan, the main document which regulates and defines state programs and activities in the field of minority integration.

Mechanisms of Minority Governance in Georgia

Historically Georgia is home to many diverse ethnic and religious groups. According to the latest census, conducted in 2002, ethnic minorities constitute 16% of the population, the largest ethnic groups being Azerbaijanis (6.5%), and Armenians (5.7%). Other ethnic groups, which together account for 4% of the population, include Ossetians, Russians, Greeks, Kurds, Assyrians, Chechens (also known in Georgia as Kists), Jews, Ukrainians, Poles and others. Azerbaijanis and Armenians are mostly concentrated in the regions of Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti, respectively. However, they are also well represented in the Kakheti and Shida Kartli regions, and the cities of Tbilisi and Batumi.

The level of civil integration of ethnic minorities varies from region to region. In the districts where ethnic minorities are settled compactly, the problem is directly related to the degree of knowledge of the Georgian language. As a Soviet heritage, ethnic Armenians living in the Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts of Samtskhe-Javakheti and ethnic Azerbaijanis living in the Marneuli, Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Gardabani and Tsalka districts of Kvemo Kartli normally communicate in Russian when outside their communities. Russian is also the language of the local administrations, however official documents sent to the central authorities are usually translated into Georgian. The situation has barely changed in two decades since Georgia's independence, and the overwhelming majority of residents in both regions cannot speak the official state language. This remains the main factor hindering their integration.

In the areas where the national minorities are dispersed, especially in Tbilisi, the situation is relatively better. More people are fluent in Georgian and in many cases their level of knowledge is the same as of their native languages. This, however, does not ensure their full integration. While knowledge of the official language is useful for various economic activities, national minorities continue to face significant problems in the main cities with respect to their civil and political participation and representation.

In recent history, the attitude of the state towards the national minorities has not been consistent. In the Soviet period, civil integration was not deemed urgent, as ethnic Georgians and national minorities all were Soviet citizens and the Russian language was their *lingua franca*. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the new Georgian state faced the problem of civil integration of national minorities, but was not able to address this in a constructive manner. Zviad Gamsakhurdia's government not only was unable to implement the politics of civil integration, it identified national minorities as a threat for the newly formed Georgian state, forcing thousands of people of various ethnicities to migrate from Georgia. This process was particularly extensive in case of the Ossetian population, many of whom were forced to leave their homes, villages and settlements. Statistical data from two consecutive censuses (1989 and 2002) unequivocally show that the percentage of national minorities dropped from 23% to 16.2% in little more than a decade.

The intolerant attitude towards national minorities changed significantly after Eduard Shevardnadze came to power in 1992, though his government did not develop any consistent policy for the process of civil integration. Many communities of national minorities became largely isolated, remained non-represented in the political life of the country and their cultural heritage was inadequately protected. Some communities, such as the Roma, were effectively marginalized and became highly vulnerable.

With respect to the improvement of the integration of national minorities, the most important point is the implementation of adequate and effective state policies and the development of institutional mechanisms for the management of cultural diversity. The need for the implementation of such policies by the government was especially apparent after the Rose Revolution, although at the initial stage the policies directed towards the promotion of integration of national minorities was characterized with inconsistency, including the establishment of several parallel structures, frequent changes of their obligations and mandates, and the absence of a comprehensive plan or program for integration.

The first serious and consistent steps were made after 2006, when the Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of National Minorities entered into force, giving significant momentum to the formation of a state strategy and the improvement of the institutional management of the national minorities. From 2008, the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civil Equality (former State Minister for Reintegration) has been in charge of implementing the policies of integration of national minorities. Another important step in the direction of integration of national minorities was the adoption of the National Concept on Tolerance and Civil Integration and Action Plan in May 2009. The Action Plan was designed for five years and envisaged the implementation of different activities by state agencies with the financial support of the state budget. The adoption of the Concept could be regarded as a decisive step in providing the necessary conditions for the development of a national policy in the issues of national minorities and integration and for the creation of consistent mechanisms to implement multilateral decisions.

The Concept and the Action Plan are based on both the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the Constitution of Georgia. The main goal of the Concept is the “creation of a democratic, consolidated civil society based on common values, which regards diversity as the source of its strength and provides to each citizen, maintenance of his/her identity and opportunity for development.” The Concept focuses on six priority tasks: rule of law, education and the state language, availability of media and information, political integration and civil involvement, social and regional integration, and maintaining culture and originality. In spite of the change of government in 2012, the Concept kept its legitimacy; moreover the new government, unlike in other fields, did not fundamentally change the existing state approach towards national minorities. The challenging issue for the current government is to improve and re-define the priority areas and programs of the Concept for future interventions, since the validity of the Concept and Action Plan expired in April 2014. The approval of the new strategy is expected in fall 2014. The draft Concept and Action Plan have not been presented yet; however the Government made a promising step by facilitating the elaboration of an Assessment Report on the Implementation of the Concept for 2009–2014, conducted by independent experts in September–December 2013. It is anticipated that the new state strategy will consider the experts’ report on the previous state Concept.

While the government is the main responsible body in minority governance, there are other important supportive agencies and mechanisms relevant to national minor-

ity civil integration. The role of the Public Defender of Georgia can be underlined in this regard. Its mission and mandate expanded significantly in December 2005, when the special permanent consultation body—the Council of National Minorities—was established. The Council of National Minorities unifies most organizations of the national minorities operating in the country, especially those that operate in Tbilisi and seek to provide consultations and promote collaboration between the national minorities and the government. The role of the Council of National Minorities further expanded with the adoption of the National Concept on Tolerance and Civil Integration. As the overall structure unifying the national minorities, as well as the main advisory body, the Council of National Minorities is regarded as the monitoring body for the process of implementation of the Action Plan and the advisory body addressing the current issues of integration and protection of the national minorities with the government.

Challenges Facing the State Policy

Political participation and representation is one of the key criteria determining the level of integration of the national minorities in society. Georgian legislation provides a number of norms guaranteeing equal rights for national minorities. The Constitution, the Civil Code, and the Law on Political Associations provide for the membership of citizens in any public and political organization, regardless of their ethnic or religious background. The only restriction imposed by the Law on Political Associations, Article 6, is the prohibition against the establishment of a regional political party.

In addition, the Georgian legislation does not provide for any quotas for the participation of national minorities in government bodies and agencies. According to Article 15 of the Law on Civil Service: “Any citizen of Georgia has the right to be a public servant, provided that he or she has adequate command of the official language (i.e. Georgian), has required knowledge and experience, and is 21 years old.” The same norms apply to the participation in self-governing bodies: according to Article 6 of the Code on Local Self-government, Georgian citizens have the right to be elected in local self-government bodies, irrespective of their race, color, language, religion, national or ethnical belonging, though, on the basis of Article 9 of the same law, the working language of local self-government bodies is Georgian.

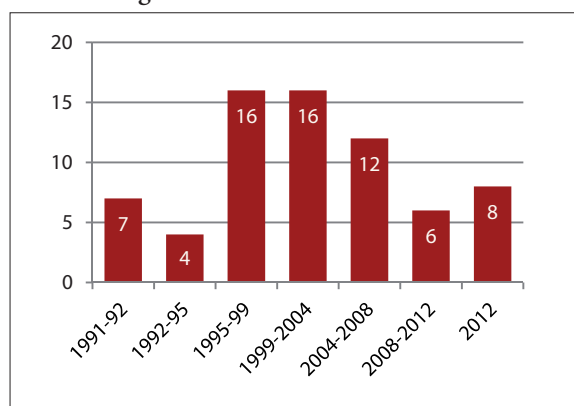
In spite of these protections, the major problem in the implementation of national minority policy is its conceptual and institutional shortcomings. The Assessment Report makes this point clearly by pointing out that while the Concept and Action Plan does acknowledge the existence of the problem that national minorities do not suf-

ficiently participate in political and public life, they do not propose concrete measures to remedy the situation.

This general inconsistency is reflected in following key challenges facing minority governance and political participation:

- Limited representation of national minorities in Parliament and other public services. According to available statistical data, the number of minority MPs has gradually shrunk in the Georgian parliament. Currently there are 8 minority MPs; figures from previous parliamentary terms are: 2008–2012: 6 MPs, 2004–2008: 12 MPs, 1999–2004: 16 MPs, 1995–1999: 16 MPs (see Figure 1). The lack of adequate representation leads to the neglect of minority-related issues among national-level decision makers. National minorities are also barely represented in other public bodies, such as ministries, departments, etc. The issue of political representation is considered one of the priority areas of the National Concept on Tolerance and Civil Integration, however special measures are not envisaged in the activities of the Action Plan.

Figure 1: National Minority Members of the Georgian Parliament



Source: ECMI Caucasus

- National minorities are relatively well represented in local governance units in regions of minority compact settlements. However their influence on local politics is rather limited, because of the centralization of governance in Georgia. Local municipalities lack real power, which prevents minorities from being engaged in local decision-making processes. This issue is directly related to the local self-governance and decentralization arrangements in Georgia. The local self-governance legislation adopted in 2006 did not ensure effective minority participation. The current decentralization reform, which was finalized in February 2014, does focus on increased community participation; however it will only be possible to discuss its real implications on national minorities

after the 15 June 2014 local elections. Traditionally, national minorities are properly represented in the areas of their compact settlement, in particular, in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli. Compared with the other ethnic groups, the Armenians are adequately represented in Akhalkalaki, Ninotsminda, Akhaltsikhe, Tsalka and Marneuli sakrebulo. And while the national number of Azeris is greater than that of Armenians, their representation is much lower, with a total political representation of 3.7% in local councils nationwide. (See Figures 2 and 3)

Figure 2: National Minority Sakrebulo Members in Samtskhe-Javakheti

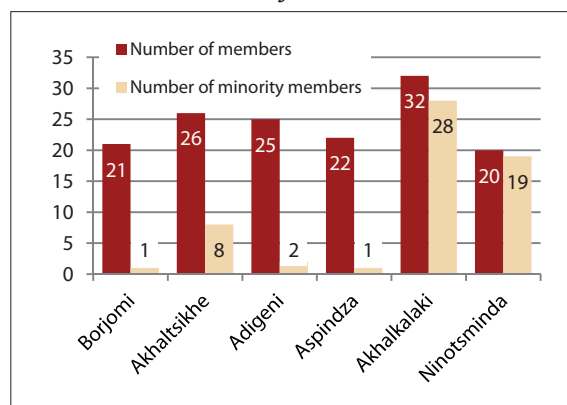
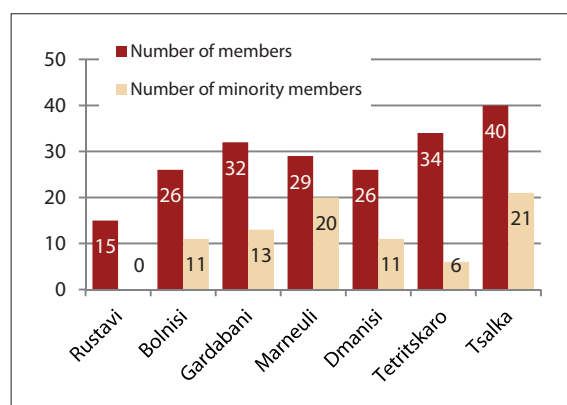


Figure 3: National Minority Sakrebulo Members in Kvemo Kartli



- The low level of Georgian political culture, which does not create appropriate conditions for national minority political activities. Along these lines, special emphasis should be given to Georgian political party activities. The Public Defender's assessment shows that Georgian political parties express very limited interest in working in national minority municipalities, at the same time, they do not typically include minority representatives in their party structures. Moreover only a few political parties offer

the inclusion of minority candidates in pre-election political party lists for proportional elections. This is reflected in the virtual absence of national minorities in the election lists of all political parties.

- Inconsistency of certain measures of the state. On the one hand, the governmental programs, especially the National Concept on Tolerance and Civil Integration and Action Plan, are formally minority inclusive and oriented on increased political participation, but, on the other hand, minority needs are not properly assessed and put into consistent policy. One of the examples of this inconsistency is the failure of capacity building programs for national minority local self-governance staff. In 2006 the government of Georgia established a separate capacity building facility (Zurab Zhvania School for Public Administration in Kutaisi) for national minorities aimed at equipping minority representatives with specific knowledge and skills in the area of public administration. However, despite the initial promise of this new school, it has instead shifted exclusively into state language training and currently there is no special mechanism available for supporting capacity building to build a new cadre of national minority public administration personnel.

About the Author

Dr. Giorgi Sordia is Research Associate at the European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI) and an Associate Professor at the University of Georgia (UG).

Further Readings

- Assessment Document of the Implementation of the National Concept on Tolerance and Civil Integration and 2009–2014 Action Plan. State Minister's Office for Reconciliation and Civil Equality, Tbilisi 2014.
- Monitoring Results of Implementation of the National Concept and Action Plan on Tolerance and Civil Integration 2010–2011, Council of National Minorities under the auspices of the Public Defender of Georgia.
- Integration of National Minorities in the Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli Provinces of Georgia. ECMI Working Paper #44, September 2009.
- Institutions of Georgia for Governance of National Minorities. ECMI Working Paper #43, September 2009.

Conclusion

Georgia has succeeded in developing a special minority governance model. The minority-related policies are defined and implemented by the government through the State Minister's Office for Reconciliation and Civil Equality. Moreover, the government has initiated and adopted the National Concept on Tolerance and Civil Integration and Action Plan, the main official document regulating state policy on national minority issues. At the same time, the improvement of the institutional framework and the development of a relevant strategy did not ensure a tangible breakthrough, especially in the area of national minority political and social participation. The assessment of the state programs and initiatives demonstrated that inconsistency and inefficiency were the main impeding factors hindering Georgian minority governance. For the time being, the key challenge for the current Georgian government and policy makers is to adequately analyze the shortcomings and inconsistencies of the implemented policy and to develop needs-based, results-oriented and a more efficient state strategy for the forthcoming years.