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Some Important Factors Hindering the Civic Integration of Ethnic Minorities

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Some Important Factors Hindering the Civic Integration of Ethnic Minorities

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to compile and group the list of problems that hinder the integration of ethnic minorities in the political, economic and cultural life of the country, based on research conducted by various organizations over the past 10 years. According to these studies, the main problem is, on the one hand, the language barrier and, on the other hand, ethnic-nationalist tendencies and stereotypes. These national mythologies and notions play one of the crucial roles in the formation of national self-identification. Ethno-nationalist tendencies are strong both in minorities and in ethnic Georgians. There are several factors behind the emergence of the ethnonationalism in Georgia. First of all, it is the legacy of Soviet totalitarianism, as well as the result of the current socio-political situation. Understanding these two factors will give us a better answer as to why ethnic-nationalist sentiments are still prevailing in Georgia and why the integration of the ethnic minorities is hindered, despite being repeatedly declared by the state. The language barrier of ethnic minorities is also an important problem in the process of integration into society. The education system should make the knowledge of the state language accessible to ethnic minorities and, at the same time, ensure the protection of minority languages. To do this, the state must maximize and encourage local staff; The general system of education should ensure the upbringing of the citizen of the country and not put any group (even the majority) in an advantageous situation. show the advantage of any (even the majority) group.

Keywords: *Ethnic minorities, civic integration, stereotypes, State language.*

Introduction

Georgia is a multilingual and multi-ethnic country. According to the 2014 census, ethnic Georgians make up 86.83 % of the total population, while other ethnic groups - 13, 17% 6.3 % of them are Azerbaijanis and 4.5 % are Armenians (Census Results, 2014).

As a result of the Soviet ethnolinguistic policy, both Georgians and ethnic minorities found it difficult to view themselves as members of one united civic nation (CRRC, 2021)

Methodology

The article aims to identify the main obstacles to the integration of minorities based on existing research and to offer recommendations to relevant governmental and non-governmental organizations to address them. We have developed research reports conducted by international or non-governmental organizations (Komakhia, 2008, Dundua & Abashidze, 2009, Svanidze & Tabatadze, 2011, NIMD, 2017, Tabatadze, 2017, Tabatadze, 2019, Kachkachishvili, 2019, CRRC, 2021), as well as the reports prepared by the office of the State Minister of Georgia for reconciliation and civic equality (National Concept, 2015, 2021), on the basis of whose analysis and generalization, we reached Important conclusions.

Findings

1.1. Attitudes of minorities and existing harmful stereotypes

Ethnicity in the Soviet Union was institutionalized, and language policy was a central issue of ethnonational policy, which excluded minorities from the titular nationalities of the union republics. Titular nations considered the union republics as their possessions and treated other ethnicities with discrimination (Dundua & Abashidze, 2009). After the collapse of the USSR, newly independent Georgia faced a challenge of the construction of national civic identity. Although all the residents of Georgia obtained Georgian citizenship, minorities could not fully participate in state life, and the majority was distrustful of them (Kachkachishvili, 2019, CRRC, 2021).

Unlike previous governments (Gamsakhurdia, Shevardnadze), Saakashvili often spoke about political dimensions of nation. His government understood the importance of language policy for minority integration, but implementation of policy proved to be very difficult.

The difficulty of the problems in the given field is that the minorities living in Georgia significantly differ from one another in terms of number, type of residence (compact or dispersed) and degree of integration into the social life of the country (Tabatadze, Gabunia & Odzeli, 2008).

Ethnic minorities in Georgia compactly live in four regions (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti). About 7% of minorities are dispersed (these groups are Russians, Greeks, Kurds and Yezidis, Assyrians, Jews, Ukrainians, etc.) (Gabunia, 2014).

It is important to note that the regions of Georgia, where ethnic minorities compactly live, are bordered by their historical homeland. Samtskhe-Javakheti (the majority of the population in the region is ethnically Armenian) borders Armenia, and the Kvemo Kartli region (where the majority of the population is ethnically Azerbaijani) borders Azerbaijan (Svanidze, 2002; Tabatadze, 2008). On the other hand, minorities feel as second-class citizens. They fear assimilation as a threat to their identities (Kachkachishvili, 2019).

Another critical issue is the ethnic Georgian population living in the compact settlements of ethnic minorities are minorities themselves (the so-called “majority in the minority” - Tabatadze, 2017). For instance, ethnic Georgians are a minority in several municipalities in Kvemo Kartli (Marneuli, Gardabani, Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Tsalka) and Samtskhe-Javakheti (Ninotsminda, Akhalkalaki, Akhaltsikhe).

An important aspect of civic nation-building is to integrate minorities in country's political, economic and cultural life (Kachkachishvili, 2019).

Although Georgia has made some progress in building a democratic state in the last two decades, the foundations of sustainable democratic institutions are still weak. Amidst such democratic institutions, the formation of ethnic minorities into a single civil society becomes difficult. Several factors hinder this process: on the one hand, the distrust of the minority community towards state political institutions and, on the other hand - the weakness of these institutions. All of these factors lead to alienation and isolationism of different groups of society (not just ethnic minorities). Also, many Georgians express their identity by their ethnicity rather than in civic terms.

This alienation and isolationism are further exacerbated by the existing underdeveloped economic market and low-intensity economic cooperation (Dundua&Abashidze, 2009). Therefore, the interrelationship of existing ethnocultural groups is largely based on group superstitions and stereotypes formed in the Soviet period (CRRC, 2021).

The main problem is related to two particular regions of the country: 55% of ethnic minorities in Georgia live in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti (except, Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, where, , the jurisdiction of the Georgian state does not extend for obvious reasons).

Azerbaijanis live mainly compactly in different parts of Georgia (Kakheti, Shida Kartli). However, the majority of Azerbaijanis living in Georgia are settled in Kvemo Kartli. Armenians live mainly in Samtskhe-Javakheti region and Tsalka municipality, as well as in big cities: Tbilisi, Rustavi, Batumi, etc. (Tabatadze, Gabunia & Odzeli, 2008).

The institutional approach to the process of civic integration of ethnic minorities was established in 2005. In line with the European Framework Convention for the Protection of

National Minorities, Georgia developed an approach to respect the ethnic identity of minorities and create appropriate conditions for the realisation of their rights. In 2009, “the National Concept of Tolerance and Civic Integration and the Action Plan for 2009-2014” was prepared, defining the state's approach to civic integration. In 2015, the State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration and the Action Plan for 2015-2020 was approved. The Action Plan is one of the most crucial tools of the country's civil integration policy. the National Concept of Tolerance and Civic Integration and the Action Plan for 2009-2014”, (National Concept, 2009, 2015, 2021).

It is worth mentioning that the implementation of the Action Plan for Tolerance and Civic Integration was monitored annually, and interested persons (including minorities themselves) had the opportunity to get acquainted with it and express their views on shortcomings and issues of the process. Despite the adoption of the concept and action plan as well as some legislative and institutional changes, practice has not been able to reflect these changes (Which is reflected in the monitoring reports: see Report^s on the Implementation of Action Plan of the State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration (Report on the Implementation, 2010, 2016, 2021).

In the context of the weak democratic institutions, there are frequent cases when the law "remains only on paper" and the mechanisms for enforcing laws are either weak or do not exist at all. Therefore, even if the law is “perfect” and “ideal”, its execution and enforcement still remain questionable. Civil social activity is needed to trace and track shortcomings and flaws (developing recommendations, active cooperation with responsible executive / legislative representatives/decision-makers, regular informing of international institutions).

Civic integration is hindered by deep-rooted ethnic-nationalist tendencies rooted in the majority of the population and stereotypes (often deliberately formed by external forces). These national mythologies and notions play one of the crucial roles in the formation of national self-identification. Ethno-nationalist tendencies are strong both in minorities and in ethnic Georgians (Kachkachishvili, 2019).

There are several factors behind the emergence of the ethnonationalism in Georgia First of all, it is the legacy of Soviet totalitarianism, as well as the result of the current socio-political situation (Dundua&Abashidze, 2009). Understanding these two factors will give us a better answer as to why ethnic-nationalist sentiments are still prevailing in Georgia and why the integration of the ethnic minorities is hindered, despite being repeatedly declared by the state.

The perception of Georgia as ahomeland by minorities and their loyal attitude is evidenced by numerous studies in the field; for instance, in a 2009 study (Dundua & Abashidze, 2009),

to the question,, "What does it mean to be a citizen of Georgia"? The answer: "Live in the homeland" is quite high among Azerbaijanis (83.6%) and Armenians (87.3%), i.e. - the majority of minorities living in Georgia consider Georgia as their homeland. However, the situation is drastically different when the question is about the involvement in the state and political life of the country. Azerbaijanis have the lowest rate on this question (0.7%). This once again proves the isolation and exclusion of Azerbaijanis. The rate of political involvement is quite high among ethnic Armenians.

According to the same study (Dundua & Abashidze, 2009), The answers to the question "Do you face problems on the public and political arena because of your ethnicity and religion?" are quite promising. Several respondents who do not work in public or state service do not face the problem due to their religious or ethnic affiliation The perception of Georgia as a homeland by minorities and their loyal attitude is evidenced by numerous studies in the field (Dundua & Abashidze, 2009.); However, we cannot say that the survey results reflect the real picture: other types of in-depth studies reveal numerous facts of discrimination; It is plausible that minorities are reluctant to talk about existing problems due to their closed community.

It should be noted that part of the population considers themselves citizens of Azerbaijan / Armenia, despite having a Georgian ID and Passport (CRRC, 2021). There is an interesting trend in Samtskje-Javakheti that most men travel to Russia during the summer season and work there; Consequently, a large part of the population of Javakheti has both Georgian and Russian passports. Naturally, the phenomenon of the three passports (CRRC, 2021) means that people bypass the law and raise suspicions of corruption schemes at both the local and central levels. In addition to this, this fact indicates a not-so-favourable level of loyalty to state institutions from one part of the population.

For their part, the majority (ethnic Georgians) still do not "recognise" minorities as full members of this country. Studies (Dundua & Abashidze, 2009; CRRC, 2021) show a rather low level of intercultural sensitivity and attitudes towards ethnic, religious or other types of minorities; There is a similar attitude on the part of minorities as well: the fear of assimilation (especially in the Armenian community) leads to the search for a supporter, a helper (which, unfortunately, they do not see in Georgians) which they "find" in their historical homeland (Svanidze & Tabatadze, 2011).

1.2. Awareness of ethnic minorities about the national priorities and goals of the state

One of the main issues hindering civic integration is the so-called information vacuum, a

post-Soviet phenomenon. The Soviet Union has caused numerous problems in Georgia, many of them still affecting the country, including inter-ethnic relations. Despite its official status (Georgian was declared as the state language during the Soviet Union), Russian has been the language of communication within minorities for decades. The 30 years of independence have not brought us a significant breakthrough in this regard; It can even be said that the situation has worsened: in the past, Russian was spoken by both the majority and the minorities. Today, the situation is different – the fields of using Russian is gradually narrowing since the 90, it has not been possible to replace it with any other international language (English) or the state language (Georgian). The reason behind it is complex and requires separate consideration (Gabunia & Gochitashvili, 2019)

It is obvious that there are serious shortcomings in obtaining information about the current socio-political or economic processes in the country. Georgian was named as the main language on which people obtain information in Kists (100%), Ossetians (99.6%) and ethnic groups living in urban settlements (89.5%). The practice of receiving information in Georgian is much lower among Armenian (48.9%) and Azerbaijani (60.9%) respondents. Overall, 78.9% of Kist respondents, 75.2% of Ossetians, 56% of urban minorities, 29.2% of Armenians and 29.1% of Azerbaijanis obtain socio-political information about Georgia in Georgian.

Mass media has a significant role in this direction. We should highlight the role the First Channel (Public Broadcaster), which is obliged by “the Law on Broadcasting” to “reflect the ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious, age and gender diversity of the society in the programme” (National Concept, 2015).

Several steps have been taken in this direction: the Public Broadcaster has provided the news program "Moambe" in five languages on its own air, as well as through additional regional media outlets. Since 2016, it has been possible to access the news programme Moambe has been in Georgian, Azerbaijani and Armenian languages. The Public Broadcaster also offered daily programmes (26-minute) in Abkhazian, Ossetian and Russian on Channel 2; However, this project was halted in 2017. The reason may be the launch of the seven- language (Georgian, Abkhazian, Ossetian, Armenian, Azerbaijani, English and Russian) web portal www.1tv.ge under the Public Broadcaster in September 2017. In 2017, the Public Broadcaster developed a special media strategy to increase access to media for ethnic minorities (National Concept, 2015). The main aims of the media strategy and action plan are, on the one hand, to provide comprehensive information about the current events in the country to the representatives of ethnic minorities in a language they understand, and on the other hand - to popularise the

culture, traditions and values of ethnic minorities; In addition to this, they aim to show the importance of their participation in the life of the country (National Concept, 2021).

1.3. Ethnocentric attitudes towards minorities in the dominant ethnic group

A number of interesting studies have been conducted in Georgia (especially interesting studies in educational institutions - public schools and universities) in terms of intercultural relations (Tabatadze, 2010; Tabatadze, 2015; Tabatadze & Gorgadze, 2013; Tabatadze, & Gorgadze, 2014a; Tabatadze, & Gorgadze, 2014b; Tabatadze, & Gorgadze, 2018 etc.). Studies have shown a stereotypical and degrading attitude of the majority towards ethnic minorities. For instance, the most obvious and alarming trend was observed in Bolnisi. Children spoke about the incidents, where ethnic Azerbaijani students were bullied and abused (Mikeladz, Zviadadze, Jishkariani, 2018), For example, some students refer to Azerbaijani students and “Tatars” and mention other abusive attitudes and behaviours, such as excluding and separating them from students of other nationalities (because the student had a speech problem in Georgian). A clear trend is observed schools and universities do not teach them to accept and recognise minorities. Instead, they teach them how do adapt to this existing reality (Dundua & Abashidze, 2009).

Parents talk about the low self-confidence of ethnic non-Georgian students, which is due to the very low representation of minorities in the public sphere (Mikeladz, Zviadadze, Jishkariani, 2018). They believe that when students see that no member of his/her ethnic group is in the parliament, in the ministry, in various public organisations, they form a certain idea about their own future perspectives and such perspectives are neither diverse, nor desirable. (Mikeladz, Zviadadze, Jishkariani, 2018). Consequently, students from the very early years subconsciously link their future plans and careers to the countries of origin (the so-called "historical homeland" – Svanidze & Tabatadze, 2011).

In general, students have a positive attitude towards other nations and races. Even if the information they have contains only negative events and examples about a particular nation or country, students always try to emphasize the fact that "there might be good people among them". Perceptual expectations that exist for different countries are actually based on scanty, fragmented information. Students realize that it is impossible that there are countries with only “good” or “bad” people. They also understand that the place of residence does not determine a person’s character or actions. However, such attitudes are based more on one's own, small experience and thoughts rather than on the reasoning in the classroom and the conclusions

drawn from various examples.

Parents of ethnically non-Georgian students discuss distinctive approaches of teachers towards the students. They believe that some teachers treat non-Georgian students unfairly and value their knowledge less than Georgians. It is noteworthy that ethnic segregation emphasizes not only a negative but also a positive context and discrimination. For instance, if an ethnically non-Georgian student performs an activity well, the teacher emphasizes and encourages the student to perform a Georgian dance. In fact, teachers usually highlight minorities' achievements but emphasize their ethnic background as well. By doing so, teachers separate ethnically non-Georgian from Georgian students (Dundua, & Abashidze, 2009).

1.4. Cultural alienation between the minorities and the majority

Different ethnocultural groups have coexisted in Georgia for centuries. In addition to this, there are many historical cases of active involvement and participation of minorities in important socio-political processes for the country. It should be mentioned, however, that the situation is not as favourable today: these groups have little or no knowledge about one another's cultural values and achievements.

Perceptions of each other's cultures by ethnic groups (this applies to both minorities and majorities) are often based on stereotypes and prejudices rather than on rational communication.

The structure and nature of intercultural relations should not be understood as simple relations of cultural nature. It has much more serious dimensions. The current situation is due to the environmental conditions in which minorities had to live. The fragile formal-institutional context (and heavy Soviet legacy) of the Georgian public-political space plays a crucial role in the exclusion of minorities.

When it comes to the field of culture, the most important challenge for the government is to protect the cultural heritage of the minorities and, at the same time, fully integrate it into the Georgian cultural space. The Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports is funding and implementing a number of practical projects aimed at preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of ethnic minorities, including *Diverse Georgia*, *Multi-Ethnic Art festival - "Under One Sky - Dialogue of Cultures"*, *"All cultures are different but equal"* etc. (Report on the Implementation (2021)).

1.5. Problems in the field of education of minorities

There are 208 non-Georgian language public schools in Georgia. In addition to this, there are non-Georgian language sectors in Georgian public schools with Russian, Armenian and Azerbaijani languages of instruction (total of 89 such sectors. A total of 51,737 students study in non-Georgian language schools and sectors (Report on the Implementation (2021).

As mentioned above, the language barrier for ethnic minorities is a significant problem in the process of integration into society. According to the Law on Public Servants, administrative proceedings in public institutions are conducted only in the state language, which is a significant barrier for minorities in terms of employment in public services. However, the lack of / low degree of state language knowledge is only **one link in the chain of problems** that emerges in the field of minority education.

The situation is quite difficult in terms of pre-school institutions: the enrollment rate of children in Georgia (69.5%) is much lower than the European target (95%) (Peeters et al, 2016). Drastic measures should be taken by the state in this regard. Preschools are funded by the local self- governments and are not directly subordinated to the Ministry of Education. This inherently reduces the quality and effectiveness of education and PR. teaching. In addition, some municipalities have a rather small budget, which hinders the opening of preschools on the basis of the actual needs.

Due to the existing situation, the introduction of bilingual education at the preschool level is hindered. Bilingual education at the preschool level is of great importance and should be promoted by both the central government and the municipalities. Unfortunately, even the pilot kindergartens that try to introduce a bilingual model face many bureaucratic issues by kindergarten agencies (redistribution of hours, reduction of salaries in professional development programmes, inability to split groups, language redistribution according to days or days of the week, etc. - Peeters et al, 2016).

As for the schools, the main issue is the qualification of teachers. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a very specific situation developed in terms of training and retraining of non-Georgian language schools. It can be said that after the 90s, schools are no longer staffed with new, qualified personnel. There are practically no teacher training programs in Georgian higher education institutions that train teachers for non-Georgian language schools (due to the linguistic specificity of these schools). Consequently, the average age of teachers is very high and more than 60% of teachers are already of retirement age. Of course, this factor affects the quality of education in non-Georgian schools and Georgian public schools. A separate issue is a discriminatory approach towards teachers of non-Georgian language schools in terms of

involvement in teacher development schemes.

Another problematic aspect is learning resources. Until 2018, there was a question of the quality of the translation of school textbooks. This problem has been solved at the elementary level since 2018, however, the issue of translating the lower-secondary and intermediate level textbooks is still to be solved. In addition to this, the existing textbooks for Georgian as a second language do not meet the requirements of the National Curriculum. The government should take effective and drastic measures in terms of teaching the state language. All local and international surveys show extremely low levels of Georgian language proficiency among non-Georgian language school graduates (Kachkachishvili, 2019; Tabatadze, Gorgadze & Gabunia, 2020). The Ministry of Education has been implementing various projects since 2005 to support the teaching of Georgian as a second language in non-Georgian language schools. However, the success rate of such projects is quite low and need to be modified and refined. In this regard, we should again mention affirmative action policy (1 + 4 programme) and define it as an exception among these projects. This programme has been implemented by the Government of Georgia since 2010, which has had a positive impact on the rates of higher education received by minorities in Georgian higher education institutions: 1) The trust in state higher education institutions has increased and there is hope that young people will be employed in Georgia after receiving higher education; 2) The number of young people who can continue their education in the Georgian language has increased; 3) The change in the law to pass the general skills test in the mother tongue has given more motivation to young people to get higher education; 4) The level of awareness of the non-Georgian speaking population about the changes in the law has increased; 5) There are successful examples of participants in the programme, who are already studying in Georgian higher education institutions (Tabatadze, Gorgadze & Gabunia, 2020).

In 2015-2018, within the quota system, more than 5,000 students were enrolled in Georgian higher education institutions. Over 3,000 were Azerbaijani-speaking, 2,000 Armenian-speaking and 10-Ossetian-speaking (In 2016 and 2019, Abkhazian-speaking students were enrolled at TSU, however, they were unable to complete their studies). The available data (Tabatadze, Gorgadze & Gabunia, 2020) unequivocally indicate the increase in enrollment in Georgian higher education institutions.

Increasing state interest in multilingual education is of great importance in the process of reforming non-Georgian language schools: with the support of the OSCE HCNM, a pilot project was launched in 2017 in 20 pilot schools, where a separate model of bilingual education was introduced. Within this project, natural sciences are taught in the state language in the third

and fourth grade. The project is implemented by the Center for Civic Integration and Interethnic Relations in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science, with the financial support of the OSCE High Commissioner Office for National Minorities.

Within the framework of the project, proper teaching resources were developed, which are used in the pilot classes, the principals of the pilot school were trained, as well as the teachers of the primary school and teachers of Georgian as a second language. Various obstacles emerged during the implementation process, making it difficult for schools to adapt to different model due to inflexible curriculum, schedule issues, salary issues, and formal side of the scheme or some other reasons. Therefore, drastic measures have to be taken in order to effectively implement similar experimental projects or general multilingual education reform. Improvements must be introduced both in terms of learning content, and its organisation and management (Tabatadze, 2011).

Since 2015, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University has launched a multilingual teacher education programme. Samtskhe- Javakheti University implemented this program in the form of a module in the integrated bachelor-master program of primary education teacher training. Taking into consideration the age distribution of teachers in non-Georgian schools, it is clear that this programme does not fully provide and replace teachers in non-Georgian schools, especially given the fact that these graduates are only primary school teachers and the deficit of teachers is traceable in lower-secondary and intermediate levels.

In summary, despite the important priorities set out in the State Strategy and Action Plan, the Ministry of Education and Science has not been able to respond adequately to the challenges and has not made any drastic changes in the education of minorities, which we believe is necessary.

Conclusion and recommendations

Ethnic minorities declare and consider Georgia as their homeland and are not alienated from the idea of Georgian statehood in general. Naturally, this is a positive phenomenon, but at the same time, it is a fact that the participation of minorities in public and political spheres is extremely limited.

The language barrier is often considered as the main catalyst in the alienation of ethnic minorities; Of course, knowledge of the state language is a powerful tool of communication, although language proficiency alone is not enough to eradicate ethno-isolationism. Perhaps the most important is the development of **sustainable democratic institutions**. The country must

achieve an environment in which the interests of each individual are taken into consideration and the principle of meritocracy is better protected.

The education system should make the knowledge of the state language accessible to ethnic minorities and, at the same time, ensure the protection of minority languages. To do this, the state must maximize and encourage local staff; The general system of education should ensure the upbringing of the citizen of the country and not put any group (even the majority) in an advantageous situation. Show the advantage of any (even the majority) group. **Intercultural educational projects** should be encouraged to represent the positive and influential role of minorities in the historical development of Georgia.

In regions densely populated by minorities, **it is important to ensure the development and support of the region-specific fields and sectors.** It is also advisable to promote / develop industrial centers in those regions, which will create jobs and encourage the economic activity of citizens.

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