

Ethnic minorities and civic integration in Georgia.

Georgia is a multiethnic and multicultural country whose strengths is in its respect to human rights, promotion and further development of diversity and tolerance.

One of the top priorities of the country is the protection of the rights of ethnic minorities residing in Georgia, ensuring their civic integration; preservation of their identity and culture. Our approach is “*more integration, more diversity*” which serves as a prerequisite for stability and democratic development.

Approximately 13.2% of the total population (apart from Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia) belongs to ethnic minorities. The Government of Georgia devotes special attention to the protection of identity and civic integration of residents who live in the entire territory of Georgia, also in its integral territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, in a sense that these regions are occupied by Russian Federation and there is a real threat for ethnic groups represented there to lose their identity.

In recent years, Georgia has achieved significant progress with regard to the protection of rights and cultural identity of ethnic minorities, through creating legal guarantees and defining further mechanisms for the implementation of legal norms.

In 2014, the Parliament of Georgia adopted Law “**Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination**”, also Human Rights Strategy and respective Action Plan was approved, which emphasizes the protection of ethnic minorities’ rights as well. In 2015, one of the main instruments -a new “Civic Equality and Integration State Strategy and Action Plan for 2015-2020 was adopted. And in this regard, Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality extends gratitude and thanks to the Office of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities and, personally to High Commissioner Mrs Astrid Thors, for valuable support to Georgia, in particular engagement and distinguished input in the process of elaboration of the above-mentioned document.

Ethnic minorities in Georgia have access to all stages of education (preschool, general, higher and professional), also in their native languages (Azerbaijani, Armenian, Russian). There are 213 non-Georgian public schools and 77 non-Georgian sectors functioning in Georgia (it constitutes 14% of all public schools nationwide). [*Data: 85 Azerbaijani schools, 117 – Armenian schools, 11 – Russian schools. Also, 28 – Georgian-Azerbaijan sectors, 31 Georgian-Russian sectors, 3 –Georgian, Russian-Azerbaijani sectors, 7 Georgian-Russian-Armenian sectors and 8 – Georgian-Armenian sectors.*]

Mitigation system (the so-called quota system) for national minority students, that was put into practice since 2010 resulted in substantial increase of the number of ethnic minority students enrolled in higher educational (HEIs) institutions of Georgia.

[Statistical data: *According to the official data, in 2010 247 non-Georgian entrants were enrolled at HEIs, in 2011 – 430, in 2012 – 589, while the number for 2013 equaled to 890 students, in 2014 – 673 and 2015 – 741; 2016 - 960*].

The human rights situation in the occupied territories of Abkhazia and Tskinali region/South Ossetia is concerning, the most vulnerable are ethnic Georgians whose rights are severely violated. In particular, the process of education in native Georgian language for ethnic-Georgians in the remaining 11 schools since 2015-2016 academic year have been suspended and substituted by Russian language, respectively. Georgian textbooks are forbidden in those schools and academic process runs by using textbooks prepared for Russian schools. Over 90% of teachers and personnel and 97% of pupils are ethnic Georgians and most of them even have no command of Russian language.

Georgia pays attention to the preservation of languages exercised by small ethnic groups that require promotion and support. At this stage, the standards of language instruction (for Ossetian, Chechen, Kurdish, Udi, Avar, Assyrian languages) are approved, these languages are introduced in various public schools (upon request). Public schools in the villages of Pona, Arashperani and Tsitskanaantseri in Kakheti region receive the state funds for teaching the Ossetian language.

According to 2014 Census, 604 Roma permanently reside in Georgia. Registration of **Roma population** and the process of ensuring their legal support is in progress since 2010. Roma are also provided with free judicial consultations. In parallel, special educational program “Social Inclusion” aimed at integration of children, also Roma children, into formal education is under implementation. As an outcome of the program, the number of children studying Georgian language has significantly increased, as well annually grows Roma’s integration into education: in 2015 - 88 Roma children attended public school, in 2016 - their number increased up to 155. Along with these activities, active work is carried out with Roma children parents.

Lack of knowledge of state language seriously impedes the integration of ethnic minorities, hindering their active engagement in different spheres of public life. However, the state implements various **Georgian language programs and courses** at minority schools, for public servants, students and population in general, especially in the regions.

Ethnic minorities have access to **media and information**. Television/radio programs are daily aired on the Georgian Public Broadcaster on ethnic minority languages and for ethnic minorities; regional TV channels are also operational. The state also supports non-Georgian printed media.

Full and equal participation of ethnic minorities in political processes, like elections, is ensured. Special working group on the issues of ethnic minorities is established and operates at Central Election Commission of Georgia. All of the necessary documentation is translated into ethnic minority languages (Armenian, Azerbaijani), also representatives of various ethnic groups are encouraged to be engaged in electoral process.

Currently, 8 ethnic minority persons are represented in the Georgian Parliament. The representation of ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis in local self- government bodies is proportional to the percentage of the population in those regions.

Ethnic minorities have full and equal access to social-economic programs and benefits.

Identity and culture of ethnic minorities is well-protected and encouraged. The state supports activities aimed at promoting and popularizing cultures of ethnic minority groups, as well as inter-cultural dialogue.

The state policy aims at:

-) Full and equal participation of ethnic minority representatives in civic and political life;
-) Exercise of equal social and economic conditions and opportunities for the representatives of ethnic minorities;
-) Preservation of culture of ethnic minorities and strengthening tolerant environment;
-) Access to quality education at all levels and improved knowledge of State Language among ethnic minorities' representatives.

Georgia expresses its will and readiness to cooperate with all interested actors in order to achieve these goals; Georgia highly appreciates engagement of international community in civic integration process. Eventually, it is precisely joint efforts that can lead us to positive results and success.