

International Center on Conflict and Negotiation

Minorities in Georgia: Situational Analysis

**Internally Displaced People, Muslim Meskhs,
Religious Minorities, Ethnic Minorities**



თბილისი
2008

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**Findings of the research carried out in the framework of the project
“From Tolerance to Civil Integration” implemented by ICCN
with support of the German Foundation EED**

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The present survey, conducted within the framework of the EED supported project "From Tolerance to Civic Integration", was preceded by research that identified vulnerable minorities in Georgia, isolated from the country's social life to different extent. The purpose of the given survey was in-depth analysis of the actual situation of these social groups using empirical data.

The Method

The basic method used by the survey was in-depth expert research. Experts were selected as follows: NGOs working on minority issues were asked to name the persons most competent in the issues concerning each category of minority. The primary expert group was formed on the basis of obtained responses. This group was also asked to name competent persons. Finally, 48 experts were interviewed. These were broken down by minority categories as follows:

Internally Displaced People	Muslim Meskhs	Religious Minorities	Ethnic Minorities	Total
13	11	11	13	48

In addition to interviewing experts, we used the available documents related to the issues of interest.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

Legal Space

The Law on Internally Displaced People, adopted in 1995, is still effective in Georgia. However, no amendments or addenda have been introduced to it since its adoption. Under the law in question, IDPs are broken down into two categories by place of residence: those residing in collective centers and the private sector. The monthly assistance allocated to them makes up 11 and 14 GEL, correspondingly. The IDPs are not, naturally, happy with the amount they receive. In addition, they enjoy certain privileges (payment for electricity, use of transport, health service, etc.). In the recent period many of the privileges have been abolished, which has become another reason for dissatisfaction. According to several respondents, IDPs' situation was better before the Rose Revolution. This seems to be caused by a change in state attitude. During the presidency of Shevardnadze the state policy was to prevent IDPs from the integration into the new place of residence, not to weaken their motivation to return home. The clause on imposing restriction on the right to procure real estate must have been introduced into the law just for this purpose. (This clause is still effective, even though it is expected to be abolished). As stated by several experts, the present authorities' policy could be formulated as follows: integration along with the preservation of the motivation to return to home places. This has been yet manifested in the abolishment of some privileges. In addition, privatization by state of several buildings populated by IDPs, followed by their eviction, evoked quite a strong reaction. *"The state does not protect IDPs from investors. The state sells the building and then these are investors who are supposed to settle relations with IDPs. But investors are interested in profit*

rather than the satisfaction of IDPs' specific needs.” (Paata Zakareishvili, Center for Cooperation and Development).

“In one of the buildings lived 30 IDP families and only they were deprived of privatization right” (Liana Beraya, Tankhmoba. Association of IDP Women).

Despite the above, the state strategy published several months ago and covering the period up to 2100, still looks promising to experts (find below in more detail).

In general, the experts believe that the legislation regulating the IDPs' status is obsolete and no longer corresponds to reality. *“The Law on Internally Displaced People is in force, but it is so imperfect and vague that could be interpreted in many different ways” (NN)¹.* The legislation more or less corresponds to the international legislative norms, but the State is not actually able to fulfill its responsibilities. *“Very often another state treats our IDPs much better than their own country” (Roza Kukhalashvili. Council of Abkhazian Women. NGO).* In other words, very many norms provided for by the legislation, are not adhered to. Apart from this, a large number of IDPs is not aware of its own rights. *“. There are several problems there. One is the actual implementation of legislation. Secondly, IDPs are not aware of their rights. Thirdly, the local administration does not know the legislation.” (Manana Gabashvili. Norwegian Refugee Council).*

There are *de facto* differences related to the regional factor; i.e. for IDPs living in Tbilisi and other large cities, organizations assisting with the protection of the rights provided for by the law, are more accessible.

¹ Officer of the state institution who preferred to stay anonymous.

In addition to the above, *“IDPs were not broken down into groups until 1998. Later, they were split by the place of residence - those residing in the private sector and collective centers. The equity principle no longer applied to them and very often a person residing in the private sector - in a relative’s apartment or a rented apartment, was left with 14 GEL assistance without any privileges.”* (Irakli Bokuchava. *Foundation for Public Programs*).

As for the gender factor, no *de facto* or *de jure* differences are related to it.

State Institutional Mechanisms

All the IDP related social issues are regulated by the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation and its local representatives. The Ministry’s representatives are in every region (including the regions with no refugees) and operate with the local administrative body. Despite this, experts unequivocally express their dissatisfaction with the Ministry (Inconsistency in the Ministry’s title is something worth mentioning here – the organization deals with internally displaced people rather than refugees or the citizens of some other country):

“It can be said without hesitation that the Ministry’s efficiency equals zero.” (Elguja Kavtaradze, political scientist, professor of Sukhumi Branch of Tbilisi State University).

“It is an indication that this Ministry has been called the ministry for IDP eviction and expulsion.” (State ministry officer).

“Since the day of his appointment, the minister has not submitted to the parliament even a single question related to IDPs. The

Ministry is not actually involved in our problems.” (Roza Kukhalashvili. Council of Abkhazian Women. NGO”).

“... The Ministry has never had a real power. Neither has it been the author of an initiative bringing something positive to these people. (...) The recent events have showed that the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation is a silent executor of government policy, often of the policy of the Ministry of Economic Development. (...) Is that the ministry we really need? Our experience shows that it has only been busy with the transfer of payments for utility services to the hotels.” (Lali Chkhetia. Young Lawyers’ Association).

Despite general dissatisfaction, the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation is the only body IDPs can approach with their problems. All the experts believe that it is not advisable to create a new authority dealing with IDP problems. What is needed is to reorganize and reactivate the Ministry itself.

It is interesting to note that according to two experts, IDPs started to receive much more attention in the last two years and the Health Ministry improved its activity.

The Abkhazian legitimate government is a political institution (Supreme council - electoral body and the cabinet of ministers). It has to be noted that the like bodies are non-existent in South Ossetia (Samachablo), which is caused by a number of reasons - there are much fewer IDPs from Samachablo; differently from Abkhazia, a large part of Samachablo is under Tbilisi jurisdiction; traveling to Samachablo is easy (except for the periods of political tension especially in the last years). But all this creates other problems:

“Samachablo representatives do not have their legitimate government. No social protection system is in place to serve IDPs from Samachablo. Their social and economic situation is twice as poor as that of the IDPs from Abkhazia. The Abkhazian problem is the top priority.” (Elguja Kavtaradze. Political Scientist. Professor of Sukhumi Branch of Tbilisi State University).

State Policy

Respondents believe that there was no clear IDP related state policy during Shevardnadze’s presidency. IDPs were used as a political argument when relating with the Abkhazian *de facto* government and international organizations. Correspondingly, the government was interested in maintaining IDPs motivation to return to home places as soon as possible, which excluded the elaboration of long term programs.

After the unsuccessful campaign in summer 2004 to regain Abkhazia through revolutionary actions, the Saakashvili government changed the IDP related policy. The new policy was aimed at IDPs’ integration along with the maintenance of motivation to return. Certain restrictions were imposed on the special IDP status, which was reflected in the abolishment of different benefits. Privatization of the collective centers with IDP population and their eviction from these centers became more frequent. Those evicted do receive compensation but they consider it insufficient. All the above creates a serious dissatisfaction among IDPs, especially among its most needy segment and feeds the perception that, in general, IDP’s situation has worsened compared to the Shevardnadze period.

“Our situation was not so difficult when we had the old government. The budget provided for an amount as once-off

payment to survivors' families, for IDP in especially hard situation. There were also some privileges, like railway travel, communications (the right to send a letter free once a month). Out-patient hospitals provided free service. All this is in the past now." (Roza Kukhalashvili. Council of Abkhazian Women.)

On the whole, the new government's approach to IDPs' problems has been formulated in the strategic plan for the period up to the year 2010. About 40 state, non-government and international organizations contributed to its formulation. Expert assessment of this document is, in principle, positive. It is emphasized that this is the first like document and that it actually provides for all the relevant problems. It is also noted that the strategy has a general character and needs to be supplemented with concrete plans and programs. It can be said that, on the whole, its evaluation is, at the same time, reserved and optimistic.

As for its content, it pursues two main objectives: *"These two objectives are the following: Those who want to return can do so, and those who want to stay have to be integrated and their living conditions have to be improved."* (Manana Gabashvili. Norwegian Refugee Council).

"The strategy pursues two objectives: The first one is the improvement of living conditions and the second one is the preparation for a dignified return." (Julia Kharashvili. Tankhmoba. Association of IDP Women).

Therefore, as one of the respondents said, "We are in the interim period now". The government has stated its vision and strategy. Now it is time to take concrete steps.

State Programs

During the Shevardnadze period, state programs were basically limited to the provision of small material assistance to IDPs and setting privileges for this segment of population. For this purpose IDP registration was carried out on an annual basis. These exercises have stopped since 2005. However, several programs were implemented by the Ministry of Health (AIDS, TB and immunizations programs). No state programs were developed for IDP sub- populations (e.g. gender or regional programs).

As already mentioned, the new government suspended some benefits and privileges stemming from its new policy, but it developed the poverty reduction state program, instead, which also covered IDPs. But to be covered by the program, an IDP had to renounce his/her status. This turned out to be materially disadvantageous, and for this reason the poverty reduction program which is still under implementation, is not very popular among IDPs.

“Instead of providing additional assistance, the poverty reduction program abolished allowances. That is why it has been rejected by the majority. When working on the project it turned out that as a result of program implementation a single person would receive 3 GEL less. 3 GEL already makes up 10% of 30 GEL.” (Julia Kharashvili. Tankhmoba. Association of IDP Women).

The government implemented another program – *Our Home*. The program provides for the registration and legalization of the real estate left in Abkhazia. This program also evokes a sort of criticism. It is often perceived as a propagandistic action, since, for an understandable reason, a large number of IDPs have no certificate confirming their right to the property in question.

All the experts emphasize the need for new state programs: *“IDPs need to be differentiated and the allowance has to be allocated accordingly. There are mothers from large families, survivors, and single vulnerable people. Special programs have to be elaborated for such categories of people and humanitarian assistance has to be provided for them. In addition, the people fit to work have to be employed.”* (Roza Kukhalashvili. Council of Abkhazian Women.)

Despite today’s disadvantageous situation, the strategic document makes us hopeful that its publication will be followed by the development and implementation of new, and what are more important, effective programs.

Social Groups and Stereotypes

The total number of IDPs throughout Georgia reaches, at least, 200 thousand people. This is not a homogenous population and you can single out different sub-groups by demographic data, origin, economic level, type of settlement and other parameters.

First of all we have to differentiate between the IDPS from Abkhazia and Samachablo, who belong to different sub- cultures. Their current situation is also different. There are fewer IDPs from Samachablo (about 10 thousand people). (The label *refugees* used discourteously in relation to IDPs both in every day and public speech refers to IDPs from Abkhazia). Differently from the majority of IDPs from Abkhazia, they have a better opportunity to travel to South Ossetia and regularly relate with the friends and relatives there. At the same time, their social and economic situation is much more difficult compared to the majority of

IDPs from Abkhazia and they are much less covered by state, non-state or international programs. It has to be noted that contact between these two groups is minimal (*Manana Gabashvili. Norwegian Refugee Council*).

Several categories could be singled out within the IDP population from Abkhazia. Type and place of settlement (private sector/collective center, capital/region) make a difference, of course. It is thought that those living in the private sector are in better conditions, than those in the collective centers. These stereotypes do not always reflect reality, but their existence creates a ground for some, even not serious, tension among IDPs.

Collective centers have a specific character, indeed. The communities residing there are more closed, are separated from the local population and are, correspondingly, less integrated. Also, collective centers are better covered by different programs, but, some experts think, that this “creates a disposition of living at someone else’s expense” and, somewhat reinforces social passivity. The residents of collective centers have more problems with the local population. In case of theft or if something wrong happens locals suspect IDPs or blame them right away.

The place of residence also makes a difference. IDPs residing in Tbilisi or other big cities are in better economic, social and cultural conditions.

Professor Nodar Sarjveladze (Foundation for the Development of Human Resources) distinguishes among IDPs four sub-groups according to the level of adaptation with new conditions. These are:

1. Assimilants – those who assimilated with the local population;
2. Izolants – those living in isolation in the collective centers;

3. Marginals – those having intermediate identity;
4. Integrated IDPs – those who preserve their own identity, but are active here as well and are involved in different social activities.

IDPs, themselves, differentiate between IDPs from Gali district (called Gali people) and IDPs from the rest of Abkhazia (the so-called Sukhumians). Such a differentiation has its historical roots. In the Soviet period, Gali district was less developed compared to Abkhazia's other districts. The largest share of population was involved in the agricultural sector.

The resort zone, attracting tourists from over the Soviet Union, did not extend to Gali. Consequently, infrastructure was not very much developed. In sub-cultural terms, Gali population belonged more to the neighboring Samegrelo region. The Georgian population of the rest of Abkhazia had a different identity, and the people of Gali were regarded by them as a sort of provincials. The situation aggravated during the “hot phase” of the Abkhazian conflict. The majority of Gali population held a neutral position and, differently from Sukhumians, did not take part in military actions. (A large part of Sukhumi population participated in the military actions in Abkhazia). After the war, the *de facto* Abkhazian government allowed IDPs from Gali district to return to their homes. According to different assessments, from 40 to 55 thousand people did so. This evoked irritation among Sukhumians, which still shows. Gali people are sometimes accused of “treason” and “cowardice”.

Returnees from Gali often try to preserve the IDP status. The Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation is against.

“I am outraged by the statement of the Minister of Refugees and Accommodation – Returnees to Gali are not considered IDPs. They live in their homes. But the truth is that people had to leave

because of unbearable conditions and they are in awful conditions there. It was our government that made them leave.” (Marina Salukvadze. Staff of the State Minister of Georgia for Conflict Resolution).

In general, Georgian society holds several stereotypes and prejudices in relation to IDPs.

“IDPs are identified with needy people. They are often thought to be passive, as many active people only rely on humanitarian assistance and are awaiting international organizations’ assistance.” (Roza Kukhalashvili. Council of Abkhazian Women.)

“There are stereotypes in schools, among children. In short, they (IDPs) have the status of miserable people.” (Nodar Sarjveladze. Foundation for the Development of Human Resources).

“Many IDPs are well adjusted to this life style and are happy to be in the role of victim.” (Manana Darjanian. Post Factum).

It has to be mentioned that reference to social passivity is not ungrounded. According to an empirical study, IDPs in collective centers manifested a much higher level of fatalism and submissiveness than refugees from Chechnya (Lela Tsiskarishvili, Gender and Ethnic Differences – comparative analysis study of IDPs from Abkhazia and Chechnya).

The prevailing stereotypes are as follows: IDPs are able people; they have found jobs, they trade and are OK. They were indifferent in relation to the events that took place in Abkhazia. People from Tbilisi died for them. Now they have come here and feel all right. If someone steals something in the place where IDPs reside, this is

of course their fault.” (Manana Gabashvili. Norwegian Refugee Council).

“The most common stereotype is that IDPs lowered living standard. Trading in the street, homeless life – they cause discomfort to local population due to all this”. (Paata Zakareishvili, Center for Cooperation and Development).

Stereotype in relation to Gali population: “A person from Gali doesn’t have to worry. He has a grandmother there and sends him whatever he wants. He brings his property. Moves to and from.” (NN)

According to experts most IDPs feel that they are perceived as a different social group. *“IDPs feel that they are not equal to local population. This especially applies to those living in collective centers.” (Tamar Kordzaya. Young Lawyers’ Association).* They often complain – “No one needs us”. They often painfully react to benevolent, but hasty words. An episode, told by our respondent, an IDP from Abkhazia, is an illustration to this. The respondent’s neighbor, who is from Tbilisi, liked very much an exotic flower on the respondent’s window sill and said that it was probably brought from Abkhazia. *“I don’t want to communicate with her, after that. So she thinks I came from a wedding party?! But I am not insulted. She does not understand what has happened.” (Liana Beraya. Tankhmoba. Association of IDP Women).*

There are also some facts of discrimination. According to P. Zakareishvili, the police treat IDPs more toughly and in a humiliating way. However, like cases are not recorded.

Intra-group solidarity is quite high among IDPs. Marriages between the representatives of IDP population are a common thing. In case of necessity, IDPs try to approach “their own” doctor or other specialist.

Out of the stereotypes prevailing among IDPs, our respondents have singled out the following:

“IDPs believe that the ethnic minorities residing in Tbilisi have better living conditions compared to them, or the Georgian society resents IDPs more than the representatives of other minorities.”

(...)

Those IDPs who have achieved success and managed to improve their financial situation evoke dual attitude. Some say “They managed to get rich at our expense”. Others welcome those people and believe that they managed to survive despite difficulties, have used all the legitimate resources and improved their situation.

The stereotype related to those IDPs who did not manage to do so is that they are begging and living at the expense of the state, at the expense of others.” (Paata Zakareishvili, Center for Cooperation and Development).

As for the gender aspect, it is generally recognized that women demonstrate a higher level of adjustment. They are involved in the activities the men are ashamed of (basically small trade) and are often the only breadwinners. Among male IDPs depression and alcoholism are more common.

“Men are more depressed. They experience the syndrome of lost war stronger.”(NN).

State Statistics

The Statistical Department of the Abkhazian legitimate government regularly publishes statistical information. It is subordinate to the State Statistical Department. The Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation also gathers statistical information. The Red Cross is involved in this activity as well. According to the official statistical information the number of IDPs totals 245 296 at present. As mentioned, IDPs have not been registered since 2005 (In the past registration was carried out on an annual basis). Experts think that the existing figures are inflated and explain this by corrupt interests. According to Roza Kukhalashvili, staff of Statistical Department, 80 000 people resided in Gali before the war. The official statistics on IDPs says 85000 – 86000 people. This figure inflated even more later. “Many people profited from this when providing humanitarian assistance or allowances”. People outside the country and the so-called “dead souls” are often registered as IDPs.

IDP registration, planned for this year, will be more rigorous and will cover the dimensions not considered by the previous registration exercises (e.g. gender dimension).

The Mass Media

Most experts are dissatisfied with the way the Mass Media covers IDP problems (there are some exceptions, though). It is said that the Media looks for sensational news and covers IDP issues only in case something scandalous happens. For instance, eviction of IDPs from several collective centers gained a wide coverage. The Media is accused of being incompetent and superficial. It is thought to be unable to appropriately analyze events and lacks

interest in subject matter. However, experts do not think that the Georgian Media is biased against IDPs.

The situation has deteriorated in relation to the media targeting IDP population. Because of financial difficulties, the newspaper *Abkhazetis Khma* has been closed down and the Abkhaz Television, broadcasting five times a week through Channel II of the public television of Georgia, has stopped its activity. There is the radio *Abkhazeti*, broadcasting through the public radio channel, appendix to the newspaper *24 Saati*, devoted to IDP issues, and several local newspapers. There is a press center with the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation and a web page has been created for IDP issues.

International Organizations and the Non-Government Sector

Many international organizations work with IDPs. The most important of them are the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the UN Development program (UNDP), the European Commission program. The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) have a special mandate. Several programs are funded by the Swiss Development Agency and the International Red Cross. Other players are international non-government organizations Save the Children, World Vision, International Alert, Conciliation Resources, etc. The range of their activity is quite wide and covers education, health care, psychological and social rehabilitation, raising civic awareness, folk diplomacy, development of small business, etc. Local NGOs are also quite active in this area. They receive funds from the above listed organizations and other foundations and, in the recent years, even from the state. Projects are implemented for both general and targeted groups. For

example, the NRC only has implemented the following projects: *Women and Peace Building, Women and Conflict, Development of Business with Women, Gender Training for Teachers.*

Experts believe that if not these organizations, IDPs would find themselves in much more difficult situation. It is also noted that the activities in the non-government sector do not always have a coordinated and regular character and that NGOs are mostly interested in receiving grants rather than helping IDPs. At the same time, the experts highly evaluate the coordinated activity of state, international and non-government organizations aimed at the creation of the strategic document. It has been emphasized that in the recent period NGOs' IDP related activity is better coordinated.

Manana Gabashvili (NRC) has noted that it is necessary to implement for IDPs a large scale rehabilitation program. The organizations working in this direction (Center for the Development of Human Resources, Psychosocial and Medical Rehabilitation Center for Torture Victims, etc.) cover only a small part of IDPs. As for foreign programs, they are episodic, short term and are often delivered by incompetent specialists.

Several active NGOs have been formed by IDPs. They successfully implement different projects. The organizations *Tankmoba, Council of Abkhazian Women, and Sokhumi* are respected not only by IDPs, but also by the entire non-government sector of Georgia.

Protection and Violation of Rights

Experts hold different ideas in respect to human rights issue. Some of them (basically those who belong to IDPs) believe that IDPs

rights are systematically violated, especially in the recent period. This is determined by the political course of today's government, which has been manifested in a gradual abolishment of privileges enjoyed by the people with IDP status. For example, the paragraph in the law effective in the Shevardnadze period and forbidding the dismissal of a person with IDP status from public service, has been abolished. After that many IDPs lost their jobs (we would like to note that according to respondents basically women are made redundant), which is assessed as a major violation of their rights. Eviction of IDPs from privatized buildings without an adequate compensation and the restriction imposed on the purchase of real estate receive the same assessment. A common expectation is that during the future registration only those will retain the IDP status, who will be able to submit a certificate confirming that the given person permanently lived on the territory of Abkhazia. And since most IDPs do not have like certificate or cannot get it from the archive due to the inability to pay the charge for the service (50 GEL), they risk to lose the IDP status which is also thought to be a violation. One of the respondents said that status related violations were especially common in the Mengrelia region. In the Imereti region, local farmers have been allocated a certain amount of fuel within the framework of the state program. IDPs there have not been covered by the program. The local authorities say a program targeting IDPs has to take care of them.

The other part of respondents believes that the rights of any category of citizens are often violated in Georgia and IDPs are not an exception in the respect. However, it has been mentioned that IDPs are not often aware of their rights and cannot get an access to state or non-government agencies dealing with the protection of human rights. This mostly applies to the IDPs residing in regions. The facts of discrimination have been also mentioned. It sometimes happens that civil servants are biased against IDPs.

An IDP won a competition for a position in the bank, but he was told that he was not a suitable candidate. “You are an IDP and you will be back home in 2 years time. We need a permanent staff here.” (Manana Gabashvili. NRC)

In case of the violation of their rights, IDPs, like other citizens, address the Public Defender’s office, the court, the non-government sector. Experts positively evaluate the activity of the Public Defender’s office. However, their complaint is that its authority is limited to the provision of recommendations. Human rights protecting organizations are sometimes successful. IDPs address the court more often, where they have already won several cases.

Integration

Experts believe that IDPs’ integration into Georgian society depends on several factors. Some of them are self-explanatory: Those who have achieved economic success integrate more easily. Children and young people are also better integrated. Some experts have observed that women are better integrated.

“Women turned out to be better integrated. They undertook more responsibilities from the very beginning, and went into the street to trade. And trading is something that makes you deal with people. The women involved in this small business developed a survival mechanism and, so, integration turned out to be an easy thing.” (Manana Darjania. Post Factum).

The most difficult segment is the communities based in collective centers. They live in isolation, communicate with local population very little, expect to live at someone else’s expense, are negative, and the level of integration is, correspondingly, low. Several

experts think that Shevardnadze's government kept this category of IDPs in isolation and in bad conditions on purpose, to prevent them from integration and preserve their motivation to be back home shortly. As already said, the government pursues a different policy - integration with the preservation of motivation to return. We could assume that the liquidation of collective centers reflects just this kind of policy. Another thing is that this trend is not manifested in a very humane way. (Here we refer to the eviction of IDPs from privatized buildings).

Conclusions

Stemming from the above we could conclude that the IDPs from Abkhazia and South Ossetia make up an extremely vulnerable group. The main problems are the following:

- Low living standard;
- Gaps in legislation;
- Scarcity and inefficiency of state programs;
- Non-existence of a clear state policy until the recent period;
- Social passivity, negative psychological atmosphere (hopelessness, feeling of being useless);
- Low level of integration, especially with the IDPs living in collective centers.

Muslim Meskhs

Brief Background

From XVIII century, in South Georgia, which was part of the Ottoman Empire that time, the policy of the Islamization of local

population was implemented through physical violence and economic pressure. The policy turned out to be effective and a large number of Meskhs adopted Islam.

As a result of the wars between Russia and Turkey, the region became part of the Russian Empire. However, Russia did nothing to bring the Meskhs back to Christian culture. On the contrary the Turkish language and Islam were reinforced, “so that it had an excuse for their forced transfer to Turkey with the purpose to seize their property.”

There was no tension between Muslim and Christian population. Their relationship was warm and friendly, as mentioned in Alexandre Proneli’s book “Great Meskheta”, published in 1910. “Muslim and Christian Georgians have never been rivals”.

The situation changed in 1918, at the beginning of the three year period of Georgia’s independence. According to N. Gelashvili, because of the thoughtless policy of the Menshevik government and at the neighboring countries’ instigation, Muslim and Christian population confronted each other, which developed into bloody clashes. The stereotype of ruthless and cruel Meskh originates just from that period. However, the experts believe that Christians are not less ruthless than Muslims.

The policy of the Russian Empire also continued in the Soviet period. Azeri schools and theatre were opened; newspapers were released in the Azeri language. Personnel were brought from Baku.

On November 15, 1944, the KGB, carried out a large scale confidential operation: 90-120 thousand people from 220 villages of 5 districts were thrown into railway wagons in a night and transported to Central Asia. Thousands of people died on the way

of hunger and unbearable conditions. Survivors were settled in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. 92% of the deportees were ethnic Georgians; the rest were Kurds, Khemshils, Tarakama and Karapalpakhs. (There is a difference of opinions on the ethnic background of the deported Meskhetians. Some authors consider that identity of the majority of them was Turkish, namely so-called Akhyska Turks). It is worth noting, that after the deportation 5 Georgian scientists sent Stalin a letter with the request to bring the deportees back. This, of course, did not entail any results, but it was an unexampled act during the Stalin regime.

For 12 years Meskhs were under curfew supervision. After Stalin's death and the 20th Congress of the Communist Party, they were given the right to settle on other Soviet territories, except for Georgia. Among the peoples deported due to ethnic or religious identity (Crimean Tatars, Chechens, Ingushs), Muslim Meskhs were the only ones that were forbidden to return to homeland. The reason for this is difficult to understand. A more or less rational, although not very convincing argument could be the closeness of the Turkish border to the native land. The motives for deportation are not understandable, either. We remind the reader that the deportation took place only 6 months before the end of the war. An assumption could be that the Soviet strategists of South Georgia had some far-reaching plans that were not bound to come true.

Starting from 1957, the Meskhs began to fight for return to their homeland. They wrote collective letters, visited Moscow and Tbilisi. From the 60s, they were actively supported by Georgian dissident intelligentsia, but in vain. As a result of all these attempts the Meskhs were allowed to form collective settlements in Georgia's neighboring country - Azerbaijan.

By that time discord had already manifested itself among Meskh population. Part of Meskhs perceived themselves Georgian, part thought they were Turks, and the majority did not have any clear identity. Religious identity was something most important, which is still the case. From the 70s, the following terms appeared in the Soviet media: “Caucasian Turks”, “Soviet Turks”, “Meskhetian Turks”, and “Turk Meskhs”. Finally, the language adopted the latter two terms.

At the end of the 60s, several Meskh families tried to settle down in Georgia, but in vain. A new wave of repatriates appeared in the 80s. 300 families had returned by the year 1989, which was facilitated by the relevant resolution of the Council of Ministers of the Georgian Soviet Republic.

On May 23, 1989, mass violent actions, marked with unbelievable cruelty, started against Muslim Meskhs in the Fergana Valley (Uzbekistan). It was only possible to stop them in 17 days, with the help of military forces. This barbaric inexplicable action was followed by mass flow of refugees that settled in Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Russia. The Meskhs themselves find it difficult to explain the events, as they have not had serious problems with the local Uzbek population before.

After these tragic events, an active anti-Meskh campaign started in Georgia. The campaign was led by future president of Georgia Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the person who started his dissident activity with the fight for the return of Meskhs to Georgia. His supporters met at the Georgian border the two busses from Fergana, full of refugees, beat them and sent them back, which was announced by the media as a “national victory”. This was followed by the expulsion of 200 families - returnees to Georgia. Nationalism started to flourish in Georgia and Meskhs’ repatriation, following Gamsakhurdia’s slogans, was identified with the “invasion of Turk

and Selchuk tribes”. This aggressive nationalistic campaign involved many ethnic groups residing in Georgia.

Nationalistic and anti-Meskh hysteria weakened after Gamskhurdia fled from Georgia, which was shortly followed by his death. Then came a ten year period of Shevardnadze’s presidency. From 1993, Meskh repatriates appeared in Georgia again. By the beginning of 2000, 643 Meskh repatriates had already been living in Georgia. Out of them 64 were students (those whose families lived in other countries). 16% of repatriates are not yet Georgian citizens.

In 1996, influential international organizations (UNHCR, OSCE, etc) showed an interest in the Meskh problem. In 1999, Georgia joined the Council of Europe and undertook the following responsibility: Create a legislative basis for Meskh’s repatriation, rehabilitation and integration in 2 years’ time, start repatriation after 3 years and finalize the process within 12 years. It is already clear now that Georgia is not fulfilling this responsibility.

Legal Space

The Law on the Victims of Repression is now effective in Georgia. Expert N. Gelashvili (NGO Caucasian House) believes that this law has a discriminating character, since it does not provide for the “repressed groups” or Muslim Meskhs. Meskh returnees also face legal difficulties when attempting to receive citizenship or restore their Georgian family name. Moreover, the related bureaucratic procedures provide for quite a high fee, which creates additional difficulties.

But the biggest legal problem is faced by those Muslim Meskhs, who want to repatriate. According to different assessments, there are 300 - 400 thousand Muslim Meskhs in total. Out of them,

approximately 50 thousand is willing to return to the historical homeland. It is the category, in relation to which Georgia undertook responsibility in front of the Council of Europe. The legislative basis for repatriation was supposed to be ready by 2002, but the Draft Law on Repatriation has not been discussed by the Parliament, yet.

This is a brief history of the draft law:

Different organizations created their own versions. One version belonged to the Young Lawyers, another one to the Repatriation Service, the NGO “Meskheteli” had its own version, etc. None of them was perfect. Then a mixed group was set up with the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation. It involved people from different public and non-government organizations. The group compiled all the versions and created a draft law, which also had some gaps. A group of layers was formed to improve the draft law. Then it was subjected to international expertise and was ready last November for the submission to the Parliament (Temur Lomsadze, Senior Councilor of State Minister for Conflict Resolution).

The Georgian Parliament is expected to discuss the draft Repatriation Law in the second half of the current year. It has to be mentioned that Muslim Meskh organizations, operating outside Georgia (out of them the most influential is Vatan) express criticism in relation to the law. They find the term repatriate unacceptable. Moreover, they disagree with the paragraph under which repatriates shall settle on different territories of Georgia rather than collectively on the territory that was their traditional place of settlement (Lavrenti Janiashvili, the ethnographer). The rationale for this paragraph could be the following (This issue was touched upon by two experts only, seemingly due to political correctness): Muslim Meskhs’ repatriation to the territory of traditional settlement is very much resented by the Armenians

densely populating the region. In 2006, our organization conducted a survey on the main problems of the population in the Akhalkalaki district (South Georgia). The questionnaire included a question on the attitude towards Muslim Meskhs' repatriation, but the local NGOs insisted on its removal from the questionnaire and we followed their advice. The NGOs believed that the question would be perceived as part of repatriation plan, which would not only make impossible to conduct the survey, but would also create a certain risk for interviewers. The draft law's provision to settle repatriates throughout Georgia could be explained by the prevention of opposition between repatriates and the local Armenian population. Moreover, integration is much slower in collective settlements.

Institutional Mechanism

Muslim Meskhs' repatriation is regulated by the Department of Refugee Migration and Repatriation of the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation. Its predecessor was the Repatriation Service, headed by the late historian Guram Mamulia. After that, the organization changed its status several times. It currently exists in the abovementioned form. There was a special state commission chaired by State Minister Giorgi Khaindrava, but after his resignation the commission's future is rather ambiguous. The Ministry of Justice is in charge of citizenship issues.

All the experts are dissatisfied with the named institutions, except for the representative of the Repatriation Department. Experts believe that a new powerful body has to be set up (or the existing one has to be seriously reorganized), which will prepare the repatriation process, and, later, the returnees' adaptation and integration.

“In the countries where Muslim Meskhs reside, should be the staff in the embassies responsible for the receipt of documents and their transfer to Georgia. The documents should be reviewed here and the potential regions have to be identified for settlement” (David Japaridze, Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation).

“There should be a separate body, a state body, preferably named the Repatriation Service, which should deal with the problems of Georgians living abroad, including Meskhs ’ problems “ (Gulaber Ananishvili. NGO “Chokhosani”).

There should be a special organization that will work just on these issues. It should have its adjustment centers, training programs, manuals, and economic programs. These people are hard workers and their arrival would be a blessing for our economy.” (Naira Gelashvili. “Caucasian House”).

I think that it is most advisable to create a special repatriation service, which will have a larger authority. Adjustment centers have to be established for returnee families to live for one or two months. Meantime we will teach them minimum of Georgian, will show Georgian cultural monuments, explain the banking and monetary systems, etc.” (Temur Lomsadze, Senior Councilor of State Minister for Conflict Resolution).

State Policy and Programs

In relation to these questions, experts, basically, limit themselves to short answers: there is no clear state policy, just like state programs. Both have to be developed. Irakli Kokaya, Head of Repatriation Department, was the only one who gave us a different, although a general answer: *“An action plan was developed not long ago. Even though it was not adopted, a lot has been accomplished from this plan. Searching for places for*

settlement, for example. Some issues have been elaborated by the Ministry. ... The former policy was to slow down the process, but it is different now". Several experts said that the state policy and programs would be developed after the approval of the Repatriation Law by the Parliament.

Naira Gelashvili recalled a state program:

"There was a project in Shevardnadze's time that was implemented by the Repatriation Center headed by Guram Mamulia. They brought about 100 young Meskhs from Azerbaijan and allocated them to different institutions for higher education".

Here are some typical comments on this issue:

"Because it is so unpopular, politicians try to stay far away from this problem, as if it were leprosy." (David Japaridze, Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation).

"There are two radically different points of view. Some say that these people should not return. We have enough of refugees, so it is not time for them to come. Others say that they were victims of repressions and should be brought back." (Manana Kobakhidze, NGO Article 42).

"Today Georgia needs Meskhs more, than Meskhs need Georgia." (Temur Lomsadze, Senior Councilor of State Minister for Conflict Resolution).

"State policy should be based on several principles: Repatriation should be voluntary, repatriation should be dignified, and repatriation should be a process controlled by the State." (Zurab Burduli, Young Lawyers' Association).

"The state should have integration programs." (Nana Sumbadze, Institute for Social Policy).

“We have to find out whether the countries they are coming from will participate... An adjustment center has to be set up. They should be taught the language.” (Naira Gelashvili. Caucasian House).

Social Groups and Stereotypes

As already mentioned, three groups can be distinguished among Muslim Meskhs by the identity principle. One of the groups has Georgian orientation, remembers its family name and wants to restore it. It is quite likely that the state will start the repatriation process with just this category of population. The other sub-group has a clear Turkish identity, even though some of them admit that they had Georgian predecessors. Some of this category currently live in Turkey, but are attempting to use their right to return to Georgia and, according to certain information, are able to enlist support among Turkey’s official and unofficial circles. And the third, most numerous category does not show interest in its ethnic origin and is quite content with the label Turk Meskhs coming from the Soviet period. Many of them say: *“Write whatever you want. Just take me back. We will find out when we are back there.” (Expert G. Ananiashvili).* Even today, it is impossible to give even an approximate number of population in each of the categories. It is self-explanatory that the Meskhs with Georgian orientation are most motivated to return to Georgia. According to N. Gelashvili’s estimation, the total number of people willing to return is about 50 thousand.

In addition to the above, Muslim Meskhs differentiate each other by last names (some of them are very much respected), and by the place (village) of origin. The well educated elite communicating in Russian could be distinguished from the rest of the population.

The majority of Georgia's population has a negative attitude towards Muslim Meskhs' repatriation, which should be determined by several factors. Historical memory is one of them (Muslims - traditional enemies of Christian Georgia, events of 1918-1919). It is interesting to note that Muslim Meskhs also remember these events. Moreover, some of them admit that those bloody clashes were marked with senseless cruelty. However, they note that in this respect Christians were not less violent than Muslims.

In Z. Gamsakhurdia's period the enemy image of Muslim Meskhs was purposefully cultivated in Georgia (see the chapter "Brief Background"). The results of the propagandistic campaign are often evident even today. Muslim Meskhs' stereotype involves cruelty, lack of culture, religious fanaticism, dirt. Some attributes of Muslim culture (like polygamy) are emphasized. Some think that in case of repatriation Meskhs will "demand to join Turkey". Even Meskhs' deportation in 1944 is sometimes positively evaluated. The number of possible repatriates also raises fear. People name enormous figures, reaching half a million.

It has to be mentioned right away, that in the regions, where Muslim Meskhs reside, such stereotypes break very easily.

"Those who are in touch with them, have a very different attitude. They say that these are wonderful people, decent and hard working. Our families were friends but marriages were not possible." (Eka Pirtskhalava, Institute for Social Policy).

People can see that they are not awful and are not dangerous; not like the people that were pictured to us. They are normal, good neighbors. I think that public opinion has become positive." Irakli Kokaya. Head of Refugee Migration and Repatriation Department).

"Negative stereotype is breaking gradually. This depends on the intensity of contact with the local population." (Natia Jalabadze, the ethnographer).

Despite this, negative attitude prevails towards Muslim Meskhs' repatriation in modern Georgian public. (We should not forget big policy here - Fulfillment of responsibilities in relation to Muslim Meskhs is one of the preconditions for Georgia to get closer to the European structures. However, some big and small countries are against this and are likely to possess the instruments to maintain "anti-Meskh" attitude in Georgia). This explains the fact that influential politicians in power as well as the opposition avoid talks about this issue and are reluctant to express their opinion. This, of course, slows down the repatriation process and makes its future rather ambiguous.

The deficit of political will might be the biggest difficulty out of those accompanying the repatriation process. *"All the people I have seen are most concerned about the fact that time passes and no one is really interested in this matter. Everyone tries to get rid of them." (Zurab Burduli. Young Lawyers 'Association".)*

Muslim Meskhs, themselves, are not naturally free from stereotypes.

"For them Georgia is "the promised land", homeland of their ancestors. Then they learned that local people resented them and many of them decided not to come. Gamsakhurdia still managed to achieve his goal." (Naira Gelashvili. Caucasian House).

"They believe that we are liars, because we have been promising them for many years to help to return but we are very slow." (David Japaridze, Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation).

Meskh returnees to Georgia have friendly relations with the local population. There are cases of mixed marriages. However, mutual stereotypes are still working. Repatriates are often called "Turks" by local population; this also applies to those returnees who have their Georgian names back. On the other hand, repatriates think that the local population is not industrious enough and does not respect elderly people. It is understandable, that they have the opposite attitude to alcohol. In addition, Meskhs accuse Muslim Ajarians of not being decent in business relations. There is a stable negative stereotype of Armenian people.

As for the gender dimension, Muslim Meskhs follow traditional Muslim patriarchal norms. The woman's main function is reproduction and taking care of family. Women do not participate in the solution of social issues.

Statistics

The Repatriation Departments has information on returnees. These are about 1000 people that have mainly settled down in Guria, Samtskhe-Javakheti and Imereti regions (Village Ianeti). There is no accurate statistical information on the total number of Meskh population. According to one of the Muslim Meskh organizations, it totals about 400 thousand people. However, G. Ananishvili ("Chokhosnebi") believes that the figure is inflated. Irakli Kokaya, Head of Repatriation department says: "We know how many thousand Meskhs reside in different regions of the world. The accuracy rate is some 70% -80%."

Media Space

The material obtained from the experts on media issues is very scarce. It is noted that more material was published in the previous

years. However, the material was mostly biased. In the recent period two documentary films devoted to Meskhs were shown on TV. Sometimes, here and there appear one or two newspaper articles. That's it. The media is not interested in this problem.

“Most journalists have a negative attitude to repatriation” (David Japaridze, Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation).

“The media has to be part of the state program. The program should clearly define the media's role in this context” (Nana Sumbadze, Institute for Social Policy).

International and Non-Government Organizations

Several influential international organizations deal with Muslim Meskhs' problem. Experts name the European Centre for Minority Issues, Norwegian Refugee Council, UNHCR, Council of Europe, European Union, UN and different foundations. The conference devoted to the Meskh problem was funded by the US Embassy to Georgia. The program of Euripen Centre headed by Tom Trier received a positive evaluation.

Caucasian House is very active among the local NGOs. It systematically publishes historical material, arranges exhibitions and is involved in the activities protecting human rights. The Young Lawyers' Association assists repatriates with legal issues:

“We had several cases. These concerned the citizenship issue, recognition of the status of the repressed person and the receipt of the corresponding compensation. There is a case in Strasbourg, which is reviewed by the European Court.” (Zurab Burduli. Young Lawyers' Association). Mister Burduli finds also successful the development of the program on the Draft Repatriation Law.

Experts have mentioned the activity of the organization “Toleranti” lead by Tsira Meskhishvili. It implements adjustment and integration programs (Georgian language teaching, legal advice, folklore centers, etc.).

Repatriates’ organizations are also quite active. These are the Muslim Meskhs’s Union, the Young Meskhs’ Union, “Salvation”.

From time to time other non-government organizations also deal with Muslim Meskhs’ problems.

Experts assess their activity as fragmentary, short term and grant oriented.

On the whole, with very few exceptions, optimistic fatalism dominates in the Georgian non-government sector, political circles and mass media; i.e. it is believed that the problem will solve itself sooner or later, without any efforts on “our” part.

Protection and Violation of Human Rights

Since November 1944, the history of Muslim Meskhs has been represented a chain of unexampled violations of all the ethical norms and the Declaration of Human Rights. The format of the present document does not enable us to go into a lengthy discussion of this problem, so we will limit ourselves to the concrete issues concerning Meskh returnees: These are the receipt of citizenship and the restoration of the family name. The non-existence of a special law, gaps in legislation, high fees, and the “initiative” of individual civil servants create difficulties. In addition, the state cannot ensure the arrangement of an effective language teaching system.

"The property, they have been deprived of, has to be regained, which is difficult, but it is the state who should start this process" - says Manana Kobakhidze (NGO Article 42).

The protection of the repatriates' rights is more or less successfully ensured by the Repatriation Department, Public Defender's Office and NGOs.

Integration

The integration process develops differently among the Muslim Meskh returnees to Georgia. All the experts think that integration runs successfully in the Guria region, where Meskhs do not form collective settlements. Here contacts with the local population are quite intense, the language problem is getting less topical, and children study in Georgian schools. Young generation integrates more easily, of course.

In village Ianeti of the Imereti region, where repatriates form collective settlements, the integration process is slow. The Meskh community is closed. The contacts with local population are actually limited to the market. All the experts think that men are more integrated than women, which is determined by Muslim traditions and customs.

Conclusions

We can conclude from the given material that Muslim Meskhs' repatriation is a serious problem for the Georgian state. This problem is not likely to be solved in the near future. There are several obstacles to the fulfillment of the responsibilities undertaken in front of the Council of Europe. In our opinion, the main obstacle is that the majority of Georgian population holds a

negative attitude to Meskh population, which is reinforced by certain circles inside and outside the country. This could explain why the political leaders and media avoid this issue. As a result, the repatriation process is in the state of stagnation. Several of the interviewed experts believe that a well-planned media campaign can change the public opinion in the positive direction, but no attempts have been made, yet. On the agenda is the review of the Draft Repatriation Law by the Parliament (scheduled for the second half of the current year). This is to be followed by the adoption of the law, and, then, the development and implementation of a concrete repatriation plan (According to the best scenario).

At the end of the chapter we quote two interviewed experts:

"The repatriation of Meskh population should be carried out in stages. First, we should bring those with Georgian orientation, about 1/3. We should look after them and arrange their living conditions. This will last for 10-11 years. They will receive the citizen's status. What is most important is to have a state program. Today's state policy can be labeled anti-Meskh, and, consequently, anti-Georgian. These are very healthy people, very much needed by Georgia. But this needs care, attention, permanent work, supervision and the creation for them of a corresponding environment. This is doable." (Gulaber Ananiashvili. NGO "Chokhosani").

Meskh's future in Georgia will be totally dependent on Georgians' attitude. Meskhs are very strong. They can endure severe conditions and soon will live better than others. But then those others will envy them. The most important thing is to give them land and protection... That is why is important to prepare an appropriate environment for them. You should love these people. If you accept them only because of Europe's pressure, you will

never really accept them. Do we need to be taught from outside what humanness means? (Naira Gelashvili. Caucasian House).

Religious Minorities

Statistical data on the denominations in Georgia² (The table does not include the religious group with less than 100 members).

	Number of members	Time of entering Georgia
New Church (Disciples of Christ)	700/150	1994
Bahaists	500	1925
Doukhobors	3 500 /1000	End XIX
Evangelist Lutheran Church	500	1917-1918
Iezids	30 000	1875
Jehovah's Witnesses	15 000	1953
Jews	10 000	VI B.C. First synagogue – XIX century.
Krishna Consciousness	200	1992-1995
Malakans	500 households	End XIX
The Seventh-Day Adventists	378	1904
Muslims (Sunits and Shiits)	434 000	VII century

² This chapter uses the material from the report on religious minorities (Manuscript. Authors L. Kartvelishvili and R. Gotsiridze) prepared within the framework of the project.

Pentecostal Church	5 000	1939
Charismatic Church	1 500	1995
Reformers	300	1995
Georgian Evangelist -Baptist Church	5 000	1860
Armenian Apostolic Church	300 000	V
“Orthodox Church in Georgia” (Boston group)	200	1996
Salvation Army	500	1993-1994
Roman Catholic Church	50 000	XII
Assyrian Catholics	1200	
Starovers	1000-1500	XIX

Legal Space

On the initiative of late Giorgi Chanturia, the leader of the National-Democratic Party, quite influential in that period, an addendum was made to Article 9 of the Georgian Constitution (adopted in 1995) guaranteeing the freedom of faith and stipulating independence of the church from the State. The addendum read as follows: “The State recognizes an exceptional role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the history of Georgia.” This phrase, that did not seem to bear any special significance, turned out to have quite serious consequences. In 2002, a constitutional agreement was signed between the State and the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC), according to which the GOC was given the status of subject of the public law. The GOC received certain privileges related to property, taxation, etc.

Several Georgian Orthodox festivals were announced as national festivals and holidays. This agreement was preceded by joint declarations of GOC and the leaders of six “traditional religions”³ (made, individually, with each leader of “traditional religions”), in which the leaders recognized “an exceptional role of the Orthodox Church in the history of Georgia” and supported the above agreement between the GOC and the State (Pentecostals refused to make this kind of declaration). According to unofficial information, the State’s proposal to sign the document was accompanied by oral promise that the State would also make an agreement with other (non-Orthodox) religious associations on the regulation of legal relations (these were to be a lower level legal agreements compared to the constitutional one). However, this did not happen. Only in 2006 religious associations obtained the right to undergo registration as the legal subject of the private law, which equalizes them with non-government organizations. Today, the State actually recognizes the GOC’s dominant status, which, naturally, entails the protest of other religious associations as well as of the democratically oriented segment of society. (However, it has to be noted that several relatively small religious groups have been registered as the legal subjects of private law; larger groups refuse to be registered under the named status and demand equal rights with the GOC).

“Based on the Constitutional Agreement, the Orthodox Church enjoys many privileges. These privileges must be removed from the Agreement. Otherwise, this will be regarded as discrimination and unequal treatment on the part of the State.” Beka Mindiashvili. Director of the Tolerance Center with the Public Defender’s Office.

³ This unofficial and often not very correct term applies to those confessions that have existed on the territory of Georgia for at least one century (Islam, Judaism, Catholic Church, Armenian Apostolic Church, Evangelist - Baptist Church, Evangelist –Lutheran Church).

“Today, the only religion registered as a public law subject is Orthodoxy. Religious minorities are also willing to be registered under a similar status, to eliminate discrimination by the law.” Malkhaz Songulashvili. Chief Episcopo of the Evangelist – Baptist Church.

Institutional Mechanisms and State Programs

There is no state body in today’s Georgia dealing directly with religious minority issues. Representatives of religious minorities approach the following state departments: The Public Defender’s Office, Parliamentary Committee for Human Rights, and the Human Rights Department with the Prosecutor General’s Office, the priority of which, as stated by one of the staff of the Public Defender’s Office, is the protection of religious freedom. Representatives of some religious groups find it very desirable to create a special body dealing with national minorities’ problems.

It is desirable to set up a commission composed of representatives of all the religions. Petre Gabriele Bragantini (Roman Catholic Church).

It is desirable to have a parliamentary commission dealing with religious minorities. Giorgi Lobzhanidze. Orientalist.

With the President’s office there has to be a board working on religious issues. It is a common practice and like boards operate in many countries. Malkhaz Songulashvili. Chief Episcopo of the Evangelist – Baptist Church.

There is no state program in Georgia targeting one or more religious minority groups. The only body, worth mentioning here, is the Council of Religions operating with the Public Defender’s

Office, which facilitates, to a certain extent, the dialogue between different confessions. Representatives of religious minorities believe that an educational program has to be developed to familiarize the large public with the beliefs and history of different confessions, the way they are spread throughout the world. Respondents say that a large segment of Georgian public knows practically nothing about the non-Orthodox confessions and the prevailing ideas are absolutely wrong and even inconceivable. Religious minorities have no channels to change like ideas.

State Policy

Actually all the respondents note that with the new government state policy related to religious minorities has definitely improved. During Shevardnadze's presidency the authorities and law enforcers totally ignored the facts of severe violation of religious minorities' rights - (destruction of books and places of worship and numerous facts of direct violence. The initiators of like actions were fundamentalist fanatics Basil Mkalavishvili and likeminded people. Saakashvili's government stopped like actions. Mkalavishvili was detained and convicted. Law enforcers now treat religious minorities in a much more appropriate way (A representative of the Seventh-Day Adventists noted: "Police patrol protects us"). The number of illegal actions aimed at religious minorities has sharply decreased.

...The State clearly declared its position in relation to the principles of religious freedom: Basil Mkalavishvili was detained. Recently, law enforcers have started to appropriately react to the cases of violation or offence committed on the religious ground, which means that this has become their priority (...) The law on general education directly states that indoctrination, proselytism and the display of religious symbols for non-academic purposes is not allowed in schools. Furthermore, it is said in the preamble

that the purpose of general education is to facilitate the receipt of liberal and pluralistic education. (...) The Penitentiary Department signed a memorandum of cooperation with religious minorities. It was the first document signed between the Penitentiary Department and religious minorities.” (Beka Mindiashvili. Head of the Tolerance Center with the Public Defender’s Office.)

After giving examples of positive changes, the respondent made a comment raising certain concerns. All this suggests that the State tries to find the ways of cooperation with religious minorities. However, it does not always manage to do so due to the Patriarchate’s influence. (Underlined by the Editor.)

And this is what the main problem is as mentioned by the representatives of religious minorities.

The public attitude is mainly determined by the church, which is totally intolerant to other denominations. To a certain extent, this is a natural position of the church, because each religion claims to be the only true one. But this is totally illogical for state mentality. State thinking should not use the criteria typical of the church (Giorgi Lobzhanidze. Orientalist)

The fact that politicians, civil servants and those operating in the public sector still avoid the issues concerning religious minorities, should be attributed to the influence of the GOC. At the same time, attributes of Orthodoxy (crosses, icons, etc) are often used as a background for public speech. In other words, despite the steps made by the State for the purpose of the protection of religious minorities’ rights, Orthodoxy still retains the status of the dominant confession and even high rank officials find themselves obliged to publicly demonstrate how loyal they are to Orthodoxy. It can be said that the government’s present policy pursued in

relation to religious minorities is tolerant by form and Orthodox by content.

Stereotypes

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union and gaining independence, in Georgia, as well as in other former Soviet states, crucial changes took place in actually every sphere of life: living standard catastrophically decreased, armed conflicts broke out in the autonomies with separatist attitudes, the country was dominated by anarchy and violence, traditional values were destroyed and even the near future became ambiguous and threatening. An individual, that finds himself in like conditions, naturally looks for psychological support to cope with the difficult reality and find a ground for some, even illusory, optimism. Such a support was soon found – nationalism based on mythologized history and Orthodoxy implying that Georgia is the country elected by God. Slogans like God is with us, Georgia is the country chosen by Blessed Virgin could be heard everywhere. These two “identifiers” soon got closer to each other in such a way that the concepts “Georgian” and “Orthodox” acquired an identical meaning for a large part of public. The GOC actively contributed to the above. Sermons and clerical texts were (and still are) full of national rhetoric. The GOC soon became very influential in society and is still the most influential public institution. The stereotype Georgian=Orthodox is still working, even though the situation has become much more stable compared to that in the 90s.

As it often happens in like situations, aggression, accumulated in the society, was directed against religious and ethnic minorities (the latter are discussed in the relevant chapter). Also, the so-called sects, that had entered Georgia not long ago, and especially Jehovah’s Witnesses, became the object of persecution (rather

than representatives of the so-called traditional religions - Muslims, Jews, Catholics, Armenians). Like actions were actively supported by the GOC and individual fanatic clergy. Social psychology says that the more different or closed a social group is, the more aggression it evokes in larger groups (e.g., first Christians in the Old Rome). New religious groups fully met these conditions and shortly evoked the predictable reaction. As for the strong aggression against Jehovah's Witnesses, it could be explained by proselytism, which is the essential characteristic of the given denomination.

Different myths were created about sectarians. They were accused of satanism, sexual uncontrollability, and the attempt to annihilate Orthodoxy and Georgia. "Jehovah's Witness" became a commonly used word to denote representatives of any denomination that had entered Georgia.

There is a prejudice related to the so-called sectarians' activity, which implies that it is part of conspiracy against the Orthodox Church and Georgia, implemented by invisible authorities, "world government". They have money which is channeled into religious associations as well as into different government bodies to discredit and weaken the influence of Orthodoxy in Georgia. There is also prejudice related to the activity of Catholics, Muslims, Jews, etc. (Beka Mindiashvili. Head of the Tolerance Center with the Public Defender's Office.)

Apart from stereotype it is a Communist heritage – you need someone to be a leader and have one ruling party. I mean Orthodoxy (...) All are Jehovah's Witnesses, whether Protestants or Catholics. The reason is that the public's religious education is very poor. This is intentionally reinforced (Zaal Tkeshelashvili. Evangelist Church "Madli").

A Georgian has to be Orthodox, only. Consequently, if you are not an Orthodox, you are a traitor. You are called fanatic, heretic, sectarian, satanist. (Padre Gabriele Bragantini).

There is also a prejudice related to statistics. We continually hear the phrases: “Sectarians have flooded Georgia, annihilated the nation, whole Georgia became a Jehovah’s Witness”, which is a big exaggeration. According to the actual statistics Jehovah’s Witnesses do not constitute even 1%. Probably, the Church also contributes to such exaggeration. There is competition and they want to make sure that are not losing their congregation. (Tamar Shamil. Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development).

We have to admit that like stereotypes and prejudices are very common in Georgia. However, the situation is gradually improving. In 2003, 2004 and 2006, the International Center for Conflicts and Negotiations conducted a sociological survey on religious issues in large cities of Georgia (Tbilisi, Kutasi, Batumi⁴, Gori). Each covered 1000 respondents. Find below survey results reflecting attitude towards religious minorities.

	<i>2003</i>	<i>2004</i>	<i>2006</i>
It will be better for Georgia if all the Georgians were Orthodox Christians	79.4	72.2	67.7
It will not be harmful to the well-being of Georgia if there are the Georgians of other confessions in the country	20.3	27.5	30.2
Difficult to answer	0.3	0.3	2.0
It is a personal decision of any human being to choose religion and the society has no right to interfere	59.1	65.0	72.6
Society (family, school, etc) should be actively involved in the choice of religion by an individual	40.5	34.5	24.0

⁴ Survey of 2003 was not conducted in Batumi.

Difficult to answer	0.4	0.4	3.3
It is desirable to include only the history of Orthodoxy into the secondary school curriculum	50.3	50.3	42.6
It is desirable that the course in the history of religion include the history of all the religions	49.3	49.3	51.8
Difficult to answer	0.3	0.4	5.6
Existence of different sects in Georgia suggests a high level of democracy and personal freedom	16.0	18.2	17.7
Sects are funded by foreign forces to undermine Georgia's integrity and stability	81.7	77.8	61.3
Difficult to answer	2.3	3.3	21.2

Please, tell us if you would support the following actions conducted with respect to religious minorities:

	Would Support			Would not Support			Difficult to Answer		
	2003	2004	2006	2003	2004	2006	2003	2004	2006
Breaking up their meetings	32,7	29,7	21,3	66,2	68,9	69,8	1,1	1,3	8,8
Destroying their religious books	46,9	48,1	38,5	52,6	50,7	52,9	0,5	1,2	8,6
Ideological fight against minorities	78,7	78,7	68,2	20,8	19,8	24,7	0,4	1,5	7
Investigation of illegal actions directed minorities and punishing the guilty	31,9	44,8	55	66,6	51,7	29,4	1,5	3,5	15,6
Actions and demonstrations to protect minorities	10,3	5,1	8,4	89,1	93,3	65,5	0,6	1,6	6,2
Intensifying their activity	6,3	3,2	4	93,3	94,8	90,5	0,4	2	5,5

Do you agree with the statement that it is necessary for the Parliament to adopt the law on religion?

2003 2004 2006

Agree	85.1	83.2	63.8
Disagree	13.0	14.6	19.6
Difficult to answer	1.9	2.2	16.7

What has to be ensured by the law on religion? Choose the statement that agrees with your opinion most:

a) In relation to sects (Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptists, etc.)?

	2003	2004	2006
Prohibition of their activity	46.6	47.3	45.9
Restriction of their activity	34.4	33.4	35.0
Freedom of their activity	6.8	6.4	9.8
Difficult to answer	15.2	12.9	9.4

b) In relation to other confessions (Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, etc.)?

	2003	2004	2006
Prohibition of their activity	20.6	15.2	14.0
Restriction of their activity	38.0	38.3	35.9
Freedom of their activity	26.1	32.6	39.5
Difficult to answer	15.3	13.9	10.6

g) In relation to the Orthodox Church?

	2003	2004	2006
Declaring Orthodoxy as the state religion	65.5	71.8	65.2
Putting Orthodoxy in a privileged position compared to other confessions	16.0	12.5	23.3
Equalizing Orthodoxy with other confessions in terms of its rights	3.2	3.1	5.3
Difficult to answer	15.4	12.5	5.5

As we see, most showings point to some decline in “extremist” beliefs. This is somewhat promising, even though the level of religious intolerance is quite high in Georgian society and in case of crisis might play quite a negative role.

Finally, some respondents say that the attitude towards “sectarians”, and especially Jehovah’s Witnesses, is negative in other religious minorities. According to Tamar Shamil (Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development), stereotypes and prejudices are typical of Jehovah’s Witnesses, as well. This is most manifested in relation to the Orthodox and Catholics (mistaken people, supporters of violence, are unable to follow the way to God, etc.).

Media Space

Respondents’ answers are unanimous in relation to the following issue: the media totally neglects the themes concerning national minorities. *One or two years ago the President said in his speech that it was desirable not to touch up this delicate topic, and it seems as if the Press perceived that as an order. (Tamar Shamil. Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development).*

In case the media covers this topic, it is biased in its coverage. This happens less often at present, but we can still see and hear the labels like “sectarian”, “dangerous sects”, etc. When covering the disputes between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches because of the church building in Kutaisi, the television provided the air time to the representatives of the Patriarchate, only. Religious minorities actually have no means to approach large audience. An exception is the newspaper 24 hours which publishes, from time to time, unbiased material on religious minorities.

Non-Government and International Organizations

Several NGOs are working with national minorities. The most frequently mentioned NGO is the Institute for Freedom (during Shevardnadze's presidency this organization actively protected national minorities' rights and many times its members became a victim of violence from fundamentalist circles), ICCN (initiator of the foundation of the inter-religious center of Christian women "Civic council for the protection of basic rights and freedoms"), Caucasian House (among other activities the Caucasian House was the initiator of the translation of the Koran into the Georgian language and its publication), Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (Training of school teachers - teaching religions and other activities), Center for Religious Studies, union The 21st Century, center Reconciliation. On the initiative of the Catholic Church, NGO Iren was set up in Kutaisi. This NGO works with women on family issues.

Respondents gave a positive evaluation of these organizations' activities. However, according to one of the respondents, sometimes, money spent on expensive presentations, could be used in a better way.

Furthermore, there are several religious funds operating in Georgia (Cordaid, EED, CARITAS), which basically finance charitable and civic society development projects.

Protection and Violation of Rights

As said in Chapter One, religious minorities' rights are already violated at the legislative level. Those religious groups who do not want to be registered under the discriminatory law, face difficulties when procuring property and founding the buildings

for religious purposes, cannot open schools, or release a newspaper. The situation in the Media is not good either (see the corresponding chapter). Catholics had been deprived of several churches that were transferred to the GOC. The Armenian Church is trying, in vain, to get back several Armenian churches that historically belonged to them.

According to respondents, after the Rose Revolution violence and the severe violation of religious minorities' rights has sharply decreased, but the facts of discrimination and oppression are still frequently observed, which, as experts think, is basically caused by individual Orthodox clergy and fanatics. Many facts confirm that the clergy of our church instigate our population against the minorities (Tamar Shamil. Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development).

Representatives of religious minorities face problems when seeking employment. A woman wanted to start working as a nurse but she was refused the job because of not being Orthodox as there was a concern that she would “poison” children with the other confession. (Zaal Tkeshelashvili. Evangelist Church).

The situation is also difficult in schools.

“Teachers clearly discriminate non-Orthodox children. They might force them to cross themselves, take part in prayers (if the child is not Christian), devalue their religion. The facts like these are observed very often” (Malkhaz Solgunashvili. Chief Episcopate of the Evangelist – Baptist Church.)

“Orthodox rituals are conducted in schools (venerating icons) which is unacceptable for Protestants. It is said in front of the class that Protestant children do not venerate icons.” (Zaal Tkeshelashvili. Evangelist Church).

“One year ago the following was written on one of the school buildings: Only Orthodox children can be enrolled into the school.” (Tamar Shamil. Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development).

Samtskhe-Javakheti is a region, where local Catholics are oppressed. All the above facts and tendencies demonstrate that Georgia is still far from religious tolerance. The bodies reacting to the violation of religious minorities’ rights are the Public Defender’s Office and NGOs. However, their efforts are not always successful.

Integration

A general attitude observed in Georgia towards national minorities does not allow religious groups to integrate with the Georgian society. This is especially true for the representatives of the so-called new religious groups, who, by the way, are not very much endeavoring to integrate.

Although alienation is more or less typical of all national minorities, the representatives of small religions and the so-called new sects feel themselves most isolated from society. And again, Jehovah’s Witnesses are probably most isolated. (Tamar Shamil. Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development).

Our respondents also say that representatives of many religious minorities perceive themselves as citizens of Georgia, are concerned about the country’s problems and respect Georgia’s history and culture.

Conclusions

The data above makes it possible to formulate the main problems faced by religious minorities living in Georgia. These are:

- The GOC has a privileged status, which is supported by the law
- Active propaganda is carried out by the GOC against religious minorities;
- The State and the media ignore the issues related to national minorities. Inaccessibility of mass communication means;
- High level of intolerance among the population;
- Discrimination of religious minorities. Violation of their rights.

Ethnic Minorities⁵

Historically Georgia is a multinational country. The Armenians, Jews, Azeri, Ossetians Greeks, Kurds and other ethnic groups have been living on its territory for ages. In XIX century, after joining the Russian Empire, Russians, Ukrainians, Germans and Poles also settled down in Georgia. Today there live representatives of over 80 ethnic groups, out of which the most numerous are the Azeri (about 300 000), who are, mainly, collectively settled in the Kvemo Kartli region, and Armenians (about 250 000), who collectively reside in Samtskhe - Javakheti and Tsalka district, and are dispersed throughout Tbilisi and other towns.

⁵ The document used in this chapter is Recommendations on the Implementation of the European Framework Convention on the Protection of Minorities in Georgia (as of 2006). The document has been prepared by the National Minorities' Council with the Public Defender's office and with the assistance of experts from the European Centre for Minority Issues.

Before XX century, no major ethnic conflicts were recorded in Georgia, (although, mutual stereotypes, had always existed), due to which, ethnic as well as religious tolerance constitute an important component of the Georgian auto- stereotype. However, the reality is much more complicated. In the Soviet period, Georgians formed the self-awareness of a title nation. This determined not so much hostile, as dominance attitude to other ethnic groups, which could be demonstrated by the phrase “Mind your place”. The Soviet regime was quite strict in formal adherence to the principle of peoples’ equality, but in reality ethnic minorities in Georgia experienced a sort of discrimination to different extent. Ethnic relations were tense in the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic, although negative impulses were directed at “Tbilisi” rather than local Georgians. As we know, after the dismembering of the Soviet Union, an armed conflict took place in Abkhazia, as a result of which the region, became de facto independent from Georgia. It has to be noted that in the other conflict region, South Ossetia, which, de facto, is not under Georgia’s jurisdiction either, in the Soviet period there was no serious opposition of ethnic character preceding the conflict. Such an opposition occurred and shortly developed into an armed conflict during the disintegration of the Soviet Union and immediately before it, when nationalistic movement started in Georgia. We are not going to elaborate on the conflicts in Georgia, since this theme goes beyond the present research, but it has to be noted that in 1989-1991 the situation of national minorities in Georgia sharply deteriorated. They were persecuted, intimidated, forced to leave Georgia (and many of them did). Ossetians, living in different regions of Georgia (but not in South Ossetia) were under especially strong pressure. Several thousand families had to leave their homes and find shelter in the Russian Federation (part of them returned to Georgia in several years’ time).

After Z. Gamsakhurdia’s nationalistic government was overthrown and E. Shevardnadze came to power, the situation

significantly improved. The cases of open aggression against ethnic minorities were not actually recorded, though there were still many problems, including the attitude of dominance exhibited by the majority of population in relation to ethnic minorities, which determines their open or covert discrimination.

Legal Space

In 2002, Georgia signed the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities, which was ratified by the Georgian parliament in 2006⁶. But, as it says in the recommendations, *“in spite of the responsibilities undertaken in front of the Council of Europe, there are no appropriate legal basis that would support the protection of national minorities’ language and culture and their social and civic integration. Despite the existence of the conception on the protection of national minorities and several versions of the draft law on national minorities, none of them has been adopted yet.”*

Given the existence of the conception and the law, it is the other laws effective in Georgia that cause problems to national minorities. Firstly, this is the Law on the State Language, that requires civic servants to master Georgian.

“We can argue about the fairness of this requirement, but the reality is such that this requirement causes discomfort to minorities.” (E. Adelkhanov. *Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development*).

⁶ The Georgian Parliament ratified the Framework Convention with the exception of clauses 10 and 11, according to which in the areas densely populated with national minorities, the use of the language of national minorities in relationship with administrative bodies and for the names of streets and public buildings has to be maximally promoted with the existing possibilities and needs taken into consideration.

The difficulty is that representatives of national minorities are not able to master the Georgian language even if they are willing to do so, because of the poor development of infrastructure and the lack of competent personnel and funding. However, the willingness to learn Georgian is also a problem. The publication of the Law on the State.

Language first caused dissatisfaction among national minorities, especially among the Armenians residing in Samtskhe - Javakheti, and was perceived as an assimilation attempt. Such an attitude is still observed. However, expert data say that the demand for learning Georgian is increasing, but the State cannot yet meet this demand.

There are two ways out of the existing situation. One is that the State should create the right conditions for ethnic minorities to enable them to study the State language appropriately; secondly, 'regional languages' have to be legalized for office work along with the State language. Representatives of ethnic minorities, basically Armenians, prefer the second option. "*In the near future, Georgia will probably need to ratify the European Charter on Regional Languages.*" (Arnold Stepanyan. *NGO Multinational Georgia. Chairman of the Board*). However, the State is not likely to introduce the status of regional languages. Stemming from actual possibilities, office work in collective settlements of national minorities is often carried out in the language of the minority population, which is, formally, a violation of legislation.

Inadequate knowledge of the Georgian language actually became the basis of the discrimination of national minorities after the introduction of the system of national state exams into higher educational institutions. Under the law, exam tests must be taken only in Georgian. Due to this fact, young representatives of national minorities, including the most able ones, prefer, or, to be

more precise, have to go abroad to get education and only very few of them return to Georgia.

“In the previous year, out of 1012 pupils in Kvemo Kartli, about 100 tried to take national state exams and only 5 were able to pass. Before you teach them the language, you should give them the tests that are easier in linguistic terms.” (Ala Bezhentseva. Multinational Georgia.).

Another legal norm causing dissatisfaction of one part of the Azeri population in the Kvemo Kartli region is that the land in the border zone is not subject to privatization. To be more exact, it is not just the law itself that causes such a protest (E. Adelkhanov. Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development). The thing is that as the local Azeri think, the land is illegally privatized and this is done in secret, without local population being aware of the facts of privatization.

Institutional Mechanisms

The problems of ethnic minorities relate to several institutional levels both in the legislative and executive power. There is the Parliamentary Committee for the Protection of Human Rights and Civic Integration. It reacts to the cases of the violation of ethnic minorities' rights, but as Committee member T. Nergadze admits⁷, the committee is not at all active in the sphere of civic integration. The post of the State Minister for Integration Issues has been established since 2003 and Zinaida Bestaeva was appointed to this position, but as the respondents say, the funds allocated to this department are rather scarce as well as the staff of the office, so it is premature to talk about actual activities. Two respondents

⁷ Speech at the working meeting “From civic education to civic integration”. Tbilisi. Hotel Tori. 6.06.07.

positively evaluated the activity of A. Zhvania – the President’s Advisor on Ethnic Minorities’ Issues. However, Zhvania has moved to another position and the future of the previous one is rather ambiguous. Finally, there is the National Minorities’ Council with the Public Defender’s Office.

“The Public Defender’s Office is both very effective and efficient.” (Leila Suleimanova. Multinational Georgia).

With several exceptions, respondents generally evaluate state institutions’ activity as unsatisfactory. The majority thinks that it is necessary to set up a specialized institutional body.

“In any democratic country there are state institutions dealing with national minorities’ issues. (...) We need a state institution with its staff and functions, targeting concrete issues, and it will be nice if such an institution also involves our representatives” (Ala Bezhentseva. Multinational Georgia.).

“There should be a council with the President’s office to develop recommendations regarding ethnic minorities.” (Gia Tarkhan - Mouravi. Expert).

“It would be advisable to set up a council for ethnic minorities directly under the President’s subordination. It is just the absence of such a body that creates a big gap.” (Tengiz Gagloev. Leader of the Ossetian Diaspora in Georgia).

State Policy

During Shevardnadze’s presidency the State’s attitude to ethnic minorities, especially to collectively settled groups, can be described as “noninterference policy.” The authorities preferred to close eyes at the problems in the regions populated by ethnic

minorities, and, at the same time, did not impose on them any limitations or the steps towards integration. In response, during the local elections, local population actually unanimously voted for the leading party and its representatives. The Azeri in Kvemo Kartli and Armenians in Samtskhe - Javakheti had stronger economic, social and cultural links with Azerbaijan and Armenia, than with the rest of Georgia⁸.

The situation somewhat changed after the Rose Revolution. Power supply clearly improved and the government started road rehabilitation. Setting up modern communication networks (digital telephone lines, internet) in the regions populated with ethnic minorities is on today's agenda. There are also fewer cases of ethnic discrimination in everyday situations:

“Security has substantially improved.” (Kiriak Iordanov. Leader of Greek Diaspora in Georgia).

“Compared to the previous government, we can say that there are changes in the positive direction. If in the past, for example, the police staff in the subway would stop people from regions and forced them to give money, this no longer happens.” (Levon Levanian. International expert on the protection of human rights).

On the other hand, the new government aims at the strengthening of the State and the steps taken in this direction have become a ground for the actual discrimination of ethnic minorities. This is the enactment of this practice no longer exists in Saakashvili's presidency period the Law on the State Language and the introduction of national exams.

⁸ Furthermore, “when a Georgian delegation was visiting Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia, it always included into the delegation representatives of ethnic minorities – children, Diaspora leaders (Ala Bezhentseva. Multinational Georgia).

Despite the above said, part of experts believes that compared to the Shevardnadze regime, the situation has essentially changed – the government is less interested in national minorities’ problems and there is no conceptual approach.

“There is a policy of neglect, and, in rare cases, PR policy. The government tries to show international organizations and the West that everything is all right regarding national minorities in Georgia.” (Arnold Stepanyan. International organization Multinational Georgia. Chairman of the Board)

Emil Adelkhanov gave an interesting assessment of state policy (Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development).

The official State policy aims at integration and citizenship with the elimination of ethnic differences. The unofficial course better reflects reality and is often not very pleasant. For example, there are small ethnic groups that do not cause problems to the government. There is no policy in relation to them. As for the large groups, some integration mechanisms are being created on the one hand, and on the other hand, there is a policy of overcoming the trends that are considered dangerous by the government. The main thing our government is concerned about is the separatist tendencies among Armenians. As for the Azeri, everything has become stricter, since the government started to fight corruption and smuggling in these regions. But the population does not have the right perception of all this. (...) In the first place, the government has to consider minorities’ demands. I mean the social sphere. The social infrastructure in the places densely populated with minorities is worse than in the other districts. The statement that the country is in difficulty and, consequently, the minorities also experience hardship, is not an explanation. All are in hardship to the same extent. The Osetians got so angry with Georgians that time partially because the social situation in South

Ossetia was much worse compared to the rest of Georgia. In the places of collective settlements, minorities have poorly developed infrastructure and their social situation is, generally, worse.

State Programs

The state programs intended for national minorities are mainly limited to state language teaching programs in schools and for adult population. In 8 schools of Samtskhe - Javakheti the Georgian language is successfully taught with the interactive method tested in Switzerland. Kutaisi Z. Zhvania State School for Public Administration has developed and is successfully implementing intensive language courses for public servants belonging to ethnic minorities. The training program for Georgian language teachers is being implemented at present. There are also some other programs, but *“despite the fact that there are state language teaching programs for national minorities in Georgia, a considerable part of minorities, especially in the regions with collective settlement, cannot speak the State language. This hinders their social and cultural integration, as well as their effective participation in the State’s public, political and economic life” (“Recommendations”).*

Out of other state programs was named and positively evaluated (Kiriak Iordanov) the security and stabilization program implemented by the Interior Ministry in Tsalka district.

Most respondents point to the inadequacy and, often, inefficiency of the existing programs as well as to the necessity of implementing economic, social and cultural programs.

Social Groups and Stereotypes

To get a general idea about the attitudes to national minorities in Georgia, we present the data of the sociological survey conducted by our organization in 2002. The survey covered 1000 respondents nationwide except for those in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

To what extent do you agree to the statements below?

	Agree	Partially Agree
1. Georgia for Georgians	42,4	24,5
2. Georgia is the homeland of all the ethnic groups residing here.	62,6	29,4
3. Ethnic diversity culturally enriches the country and makes it interesting.	56,3	29,7
4. Ethnic minorities cause additional problems and are potentially and sometimes actually, threatening for the country.	27,5	41,7
5. When choosing a friend or a spouse these are human qualities that matter. Ethnic and religious differences have a secondary importance.	43,7	33,0
6. Assimilation of other ethnic groups is something desirable.	19,1	19,9
7. It is desirable that non-Georgians leave Georgia.	10,5	16,9

As we see, the results are quite controversial. For instance, different formulation of the statements with the same meaning (Statements 1 and 7) evoked absolutely different responses. Despite this, we think that the data reflects the attitude of the majority of the population towards national minorities, which could be described as follows: There are some xenophobic attitudes, but the master's attitude, implying dominance, rather than hostility, prevails among the population. This puts representatives of ethnic minorities into the position of the "citizens of secondary importance" which they are well aware of.

“Minorities experience themselves marginal. In some cases it is life that puts them into a disadvantageous position; others gradually develop into marginals”. (Emil Adelkhanov. Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development).

The above picture shows the general attitude towards minorities. The table below shows the attitude towards individual ethnic groups.

What do the representatives of the following ethnic groups mean to you?

	Friends and neighbors	Rivals and competitors	We are our own, they are on their own
1. Azeri	58,5	4,3	37,1
2. Armenians	62,3	11,1	26,5
4. Russians	72,6	14,8	12,4
5. Kurds	30,5	6,3	62,3
6. Ossetians	34,2	21,9	43,2
7. Abkhaz	26,8	33,4	38,8
8. Jews	57,6	3,5	38,3

As we see, people hold different attitudes to different ethnic groups. Stereotypes are also different.

“Georgians believe that Armenians like to turn everything into Armenian (What is meant here is the tendency to search for the Armenian origin of well-known people and historic monuments. Editor). Vagarshak Shahbekyan. Expert on Interethnic Relations Issues.

Stereotype of Armenians is approximately the same as the one observed in Europe in relation to Jews - orientation on money, stinginess, greed, etc. (...) The meaning of the stereotype held in relation to the Azeri: not very much educated peasants (...). When we talk about the isolated position of the minorities, we also have to mention the isolation of the majority from the minority. The majority knows little about the minority. My Georgian friends, for example, cannot distinguish the Azeri from Kurds. (Emil Adelnkhanov. Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development).

And of course, ethnic minorities have a stereotyped perception of Georgians and each other.

“Representatives of ethnic minorities think that these are Georgians who do not want to have representatives of national minorities on important posts. As for mutual stereotypes, the Azeri think that Armenians are better represented than the Azeri, etc.” (Leila Suleimanova. Multinational Georgia.)

“Armenians think that Georgians are lazy and want to get everything without investing energy into work. They are also thought to be arrogant.” (Vagarshak Shahbekian. Expert on interethnic relations).

Finally, the ethnic groups residing in Georgia are composed of subgroups. For example, Armenians residing in Georgia and Armenia clearly differentiate between the Armenians living in Samtskhe - Javakheti from those in Tbilisi and Abkhazia. There is also a more detailed differentiation by religious and linguistic parameters (Christians and Muslims, Greek and Turkish speakers).

It has to be mentioned that such differences are not reflected in the stereotypes held in relation to ethnic minorities, which is characteristic, in general, of stereotyped thinking.

State Statistics

The last census was conducted in Georgia in 2002. Find below the data on the largest ethnic groups in Georgia (excluding Abkhazaiia and South Ossetia, not covered by census).

Total	4 371 000
Georgian	3 661 000
Abkhazian	3 500
Ossetian	38 000
Armenian	249 000
Russian	68 000
Azeri	285 000
Greek	15 000
Ukrainian	7 000
Kists	7 000
Kurd/Iezid	18 000

Experts question the census data, since the census was not conducted appropriately. It should have covered a larger number of ethnic minorities' representatives.

Media Space

Experts believe that the Georgian media does not do quality work with regard to ethnic minorities. Minority issues are basically neglected. In case they are covered, the coverage is unprofessional, superficial and often biased.

“Information is only provided in Russian, Azeri and Armenian newspapers. Newspapers only cover eccentric, scandalous events.” (Ala Bezhentseva. Multinational Georgia).

“There was a case in Gardabani. A person killed his own sister, because he thought that she had put her family in shame. The media generalized this fact to all the Azeri - the Azeri usually behave like this (...). In case of conflict the Media’s position is always negative. It is a big problem, because like coverage escalates conflict.” (Leila Suleimanova. Multinational Georgia.)

“When covering Samtskhe-Javakheti problems, the Media always tries to show separatist demands and the separatist approach, and often distorts reality.” (NGO Multinational Georgia. Executive Director).

As for the accessibility of information for the representatives of collective settlements of national minorities, there are also some problems. Regional newspapers in the Azeri and Armenian languages are released in Georgia. The public channel broadcasts news in national minorities’ languages, but this is not enough.”⁹.

“ – There is no consistent or effective media policy for informing representatives of national minorities;
- In the regions densely populated with national minorities the information disseminated by the Georgian mass media is not often accessible in the understandable language (Recommendations).

It has to be noted that sometimes accessibility of information is not enough, in case there is no interest. The newspaper “Georgian

⁹ According to M. Areshidze (Caucasian Center for Strategic Research), the older generation of the Azeri population residing in the Kvemo Kartli region finds itself in an especially difficult situation. After Azerbaijan shifted from the Russian alphabet to Latin, they cannot read books and newspapers even in their native language.

Times” released the Azeri version of the newspaper and distributed it in Kvemo Kartli, but in two months’ time this practice was terminated, because the newspapers did not sell.

International and Non–Government Organizations

NGOs operating in Georgia and dealing with ethnic minorities’ issues could be split into two groups. One group is composed of the organizations where the founders are the representatives of national minorities. The most influential of them is the public movement Multinational Georgia that unites representatives of different minorities. The organization actively works on the national minorities’ problems in Georgia, publishes appeals to the State and international community and works on draft laws.

There are numerous organizations that represent an individual community (e.g., Independent League of Kurd Women). These organizations basically carry out cultural and educational activity.

The other group is composed of the organizations that are not founded by the ethnicity principle, but work on national minorities’ problems – protection of rights, increasing civic activity, education. They conduct training, arrange conferences, etc. There are the programs covering the concrete target groups, like women and children. Out of like organizations experts name the Young Lawyers’ Association, Caucasian House, International Center for Conflicts and Negotiations, Caucasian Center for Strategic Research, Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, etc.

International organizations actively work with the national minorities residing in Georgia. Almost all big projects, implemented by international organizations, involve the

component dealing with national minorities. Some projects are intended for national minorities. Projects have wide coverage – economic, social, cultural, educational, protection of human rights, etc. Among the most active organizations are named World Food Program, CHF, OSCE - Language and education, Mercy Corps, CARE, Urban Institute, Norwegian Refugee Council, European Centre for Minority Issues.

Experts basically give a positive evaluation to the activity of both local NGOs and international organizations. However, they express some criticism, which mainly concerns irrational spending and lack of coordination.

Violation of Rights

As already said, the fact that national minorities do not master the Georgian language creates the main reason for their discrimination. But there are some other important problems the solution of which is the State's responsibility. As said in the 'Recommendations', *"There is no State program that would provide for the protection and development of national minorities' language, tradition and culture."* Apart from this, national minorities are not proportionally represented in the Parliament of Georgia. Out of the 235 deputies, only eight belong to national minorities (4 Armenians, 3 Azeri and 1 Ossetian), whereas national minorities constitute 20% of Georgian population.

Dominance attitude exhibited with regard to national minorities, typical of the majority of population and referred to above, determines discriminating attitude towards the minorities in relationship with state bodies and in everyday situations. The words of one of our respondents, sounded concerning, indeed. The respondent, representative of the Central Government, non-Georgian by nationality, who was trying be diplomatic in course

of the interview, and was positively evaluating the situation with national minorities in Georgia, unexpectedly said: *“If you want to know the problems faced by non-Georgians in Georgia, change your name into non-Georgian for two months and you will see what will happen to you.”* However, it sometimes happens that conflicts that are caused by everyday situations are labeled as the ones occurring on the ethnic ground. Another point to consider is that according to the data collected by our organization in 2006 through the sociological survey of the Armenian population in Akhalkalaki district (900 respondents); ethnic problems are evaluated as much less important, than economic and social problems.

“Every fact has to be investigated so that we know whether it is the violation of ethnic minorities’ rights or just a disagreement between Georgians and national minorities that has some other reasons.” (Leila Suleimanova. *Multinational Georgia*).

“Minorities always perceive the problems with gas supply etc., as an act directed against them.” (Emil Adelkhanov. *Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development*).

Despite this, the facts of discrimination observed in everyday life, and the demonstration of the attitude of dominance, implying that national minorities are citizens of “secondary importance”, is still a serious problem.

“Despite the fact that according to the Criminal Code of Georgia stirring ethnic conflict and discrimination is punishable, these norms do not appropriately work.” (“*Recommendations...*”).

There are also some gender problems. With some ethnic minorities, especially with the representatives of Muslim cultures, women’s rights are violated. There are cases of violence, etc. But

when the State or NGOs try to react to like situations, the population perceives such attempts as the violation of minorities' rights, as an attempt to interfere into the traditional life style.

Integration/Segregation

The knowledge of language is named as the main integration factor. The place of residence is very important in this respect – minorities dispersed throughout the city are much better integrated, than those in collective settlements. There are some exceptions, though. According to Agit Mirzoev, Kurds are not integrated with the society despite living in Tbilisi and knowing the language. Moreover, as Emil Adelkhanov says “*Kurds are most marginal. They feel themselves marginal for 24 hours.*” On the other hand, the Kists in collective settlements are well integrated with neighboring Georgians (M. Areshidze. Georgian Center for Strategic Research). These examples make us think that integration also depends on other factors, like cultural traditions, openness to changes, willingness to share the other culture's components and values. The stereotypes prevailing with the majority are not less important (whether this or that ethnic group is perceived similar to oneself and acceptable, or different from oneself).

The percentage of mixed marriages could serve as a criterion for the integration rate of an individual ethnic group. There is no relevant statistical data available, but we could speculate that integration is more observed with Russians, Jews, Ossetians, Armenians living in towns, Ukrainians, Poles and Germans.

As for gender, according to expert assessment, in most ethnic minorities residing in Georgia men are more integrated than women, which are related to the traditional patriarchal life style. This, of course, is not true for all the ethnic groups. “*Russian*

women are most active and the gender balance is most preserved in this case.” (Leila Suleimanova. Multinational Georgia).

Conclusions

- For ethnic minorities residing in Georgia, the most serious problem is mastering the state language. According to the Georgian legislation, knowledge of Georgian is a necessary precondition for holding a post of civil servant and receiving higher education. At the same time, the State cannot, yet, ensure the operation of an effective Georgian language teaching system for ethnic minorities.
- There is no state policy conception regarding minorities. No relevant institutional mechanisms have been set up.
- Attitude of dominance with regard to ethnic minorities prevails in the majority of population, which is a basis of discrimination in everyday situations.
- Because of the linguistic barrier, ethnic minorities cannot get adequate information about the country’s life. The State and the Media do not give enough attention to this problem.
- Individual ethnic minorities manifest integration tendency to a different extent and in accordance with their cultural traditions.

General Conclusions

The four categories of minorities have both common and specific problems in all the dimensions covered by this study.

Legal space. According to the material obtained there are three types of problems related to the given dimension and determining minorities’ overt or covert discrimination. These are: 1. Inexistence of the relevant legislation; 2. Gaps in the existing legislation; 3. Existing legislation is not being implemented.

Institutional mechanisms. In some cases there are no state institutions that would specifically deal with the problems of individual minorities (in case of ethnic and religious minorities). Experts think that the establishment of such institutions is not only desirable but even necessary. The operation of the institutions in question is assessed as inefficient. The activity of the Public Defender's Office has gained a relatively positive evaluation.

State policy. There was no clear policy in relation to minorities except for the policy of their actual neglect (The above statement does not apply to the IDP population). In the recent period there are some attempts to develop a policy, which is declared to be aimed at the integration of all the minorities. However, the State's political actions are different in respect of different categories of minorities: The state strategic conception concerning IDPs has been published and individual programs are being elaborated; the draft law regulating Muslim Meskhs' repatriation and settlement in Georgia will be discussed in the Parliament in several months' time; religious minorities have been given the opportunity to be registered as the subject of the private law, which, some of them, find unsatisfactory; the State has not published any conceptual document on religious or ethnic minorities.

State programs. Representatives of all the categories of minorities as well as the experts point to the scarcity and inefficiency of the state programs.

Stereotypes. The majority of Georgian population holds a stable negative stereotype in relation to the representatives of the most of the minority groups covered by the present research. Like stereotype is relatively weak in case of IDPs.

State statistics. State statistical information on the minorities covered by this research is mostly inaccurate and incomplete.

Media space. The media shows little interests in the minorities in question. The media is sometimes biased when covering minority problems.

NGOs and international organizations. There are quite a few international and local non-government organizations showing an interest in the problems of the minorities covered by our research. Their activity is mainly positively evaluated. However, low level of coordination and irrational spending are considered their weak points.

Violation of rights. Some religious minorities believe that the constitutional agreement between the State and the Georgian Orthodox Church puts them in an unequal position due to which they consider themselves de Jure negatively discriminated. Some ethnic minorities think that the Law on the State Language creates a ground for de facto discrimination. Since many of them do not master this language and the State has not yet put in place an effective system for Georgian language teaching, ethnic minorities face difficulties when looking for a job in public organizations or taking national exams. Furthermore, the discrimination of minorities is observed in their relationship with state institutions and in everyday situations.

Integration. There are integration related problems in the areas densely populated with minorities and some religious groups. Integration level is much higher in big cities.

Gender issues. Specific gender problems (violation of women's constitutional rights) are mainly observed in individual groups of ethnic minorities and are related to the groups' social and cultural characteristics (patriarchal life style).