



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევითი ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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**CONFLICTING THREAT PERCEPTIONS
IN GEORGIA**

EKATERINE METREVELI

EXPERT OPINION



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Editor: Jeffrey Morski
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Conflicting Threat Perceptions in Georgia¹

Introduction

After the break-up of the Soviet Union and Georgia's regaining of independence, the country's ethnic minority community decreased from 29.9 to 16.3 percent. The socio-economic and political instability of the early 1990s and the lack of the vision by minorities of their place and role in a new nationalizing state prompted those groups to leave the country. A significant contributor to this was the nationalistic rhetoric of the inexperienced Georgian national liberation movement which failed to reach out to minorities and offer them inclusion within a Georgian nationalism thereby turning it civic rather than exclusively ethnic Georgian. On the other hand, a national mobilization also took part among the ethnic minority communities which seek assistance and sympathizers outside of Georgia. With the support of a formal imperial power, in the case of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, this process culminated in two de facto states.

Georgia's historical profile of a multinational country disappeared with its non-ethnic Georgian population comprising only two main minority communities compactly settled in the regions of Kvemo Kartli, in the case of ethnic Azeris, and in Samtskhe-Javakheti, for ethnic Armenians. Currently, Azeris are the largest ethnic minority group (284,600 or 6.5 percent) followed by Armenians (248,900 or 5.7 percent). Both of these ethnic groups reside in the regions of Georgia bordering their kin states, Armenia and Azerbaijan, representing a challenge for the Georgian authorities in terms of their integration.

State minority relations are currently characterized with stability and an overall positive trend in development although certain resentments occur depending on the changing circumstances.² Minority groups are vulnerable and respond to changes both within the country and on the international arena. Although significant steps towards the integration of minorities have been made by the central government, this process is still far from achieving success. The main impeding factor in this process, in

1 The present piece is an updated version of the article "The Georgian State and Minority Relations" first published in *Caucasus Analytical Digest: Interethnic Relations in Georgia* No 64, July 2014. <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Series/Detail/?lng=en&id=94386>

2 Natalie Sabanadze, "Georgia's Ethnic Diversity. A Challenge to State-building," *The Making of Modern Georgia, 1918-2012. The First Georgian Republic and its Successors*. Edited by Stephen F. Jones, Routledge, 2014, p. 119.

addition to the lack of adequate resources of the democratizing state, is the conflicting threat perceptions existing within both majority and minority communities.

Preconditions and Legacies

For most of the 1990s, the Shevardnadze government considered minority relations in Georgia through the national security prism³. The securitization of the issue was translated into taking the minority-majority discourse out of the public sphere, closing the ethnic enclaves from outside interference including for political party activism, employing governance mechanisms based on a bargain with local authorities thus turning them into political-economic elites, and transferring responsibility for education to the kin states which in many cases resulted in Armenia and Azerbaijan supplying books for ethnic minority schools.

The “positive” outcome of this policy was maintaining stability in the ethnic enclaves in the turbulent early 1990s and, especially in the case of Javakheti, neutralizing local paramilitary organizations in control of Javakheti and thus establishing the state’s formal control over the region. On the other hand, this policy excluded the rule of law, did not create a space for democratic channels of communication between majority-minority communities and did not help Georgian citizens to develop a common view of the country’ future. In the absence of an institutional framework for popular participation and integration policies, minority communities continued to lead their own life and move closer to their kin states. Such an approach further strengthened the existence of different operational spaces established and promoted by the Soviet approach to nationality question.

Against this background, President Mikheil Saakashvili’s pronounced ethnic minority policy seemed, and was, a drastic change. As a part of his vigorous state-building mission, Saakashvili emphasized civic elements and depicted Georgia as a state for all of its citizens. He specifically targeted and appealed to minority communities during his public speeches, often in their own languages, emphasizing the need to improve their integra-

3 For more on the securitization of the national minority issue in Georgia see: Niklas Nilsson, “Obstacles to Building a Civic Nation: Georgia’s Armenian Minority and Conflicting Threat Perceptions,” *Ethnopolitics*, Volume 8, Issue 2, 2009; Natalie Sabanadze, “Georgia’s Ethnic Diversity. A Challenge to State-building,” *The Making of Modern Georgia, 1918-2012. The First Georgian Republic and its Successors*. Edited by Stephen F. Jones, Routledge, 2014, pp. 130-132. Niklas Nilsson, “Obstacles to Building a Civic Nation: Georgia’s Armenian Minority and Conflicting Threat Perceptions,” *Ethnopolitics*, Volume 8, Issue 2, 2009

tion and fighting stereotypes. The rhetoric in practice meant the ratification of the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) in 2005, taking up and strengthening the OSCE-led initiatives of promoting Georgian-language knowledge among minority communities, elaborating a National Integration Strategy and Action Plan (2009-2014), limiting discrimination against minorities by reforming law enforcement agencies and investing in the rehabilitation of road infrastructure which was considered to be a major contributing factor to isolation as well as promoting regional projects; namely, the Kars-Akhalkalaki-Baku railway aimed at economic integration and development of the minority enclave.

Despite the serious steps aimed at decreasing the gap between majority and minority enclaves, the results were not straightforward although it should be emphasized that tangible improvements were observed. For its part, the majority has also acknowledged that ignoring minority issues was hampering the country's development. But the timeframe and the resources allocated for integration strategies have not been sufficient to overcome the patterns existing from Soviet times and solidified by the practice of the first decade of independence. The policies also lacked a coherent and thorough approach and did not promote minority participation in decision-making. During the political and economic transition as states strive to define priorities for using their limited resources and capacity, the rule of law and economic development come prior to minority concerns. In most cases, states in transition do not possess enough resources to accommodate minority demands and provide them with the means to safeguard their identities which creates "threatening uncertainties."⁴

"Threatening uncertainties" have encompassed certain state-building and rule of law establishment efforts in the ethnic minority communities of Georgia, such as the state's anti-drug and anti-smuggling activities resulting in the closure of Kvemo Kartli's Red Bridge and Sadakhlo markets, an important source of income for locals. Protests broke out as a result of anti-corruption activities on the Georgian-Armenian border in Ninotsminda (2005) as well as during the closing of enterprises in Akhalkalaki accused of tax evasion.⁵ Actions that were widely publicized and aimed at asserting state power and establishing the rule of law provoked controversial

4 Will Kymlicka, "Justice and Security in the Accommodation of Minority Nationalism," *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Minority Rights*. Edited by Stephen May, Tariq Modood and Judith Squires; Cambridge, 2004, pp. 150-151.

5 For more information see: *Georgia's Armenian and Azeri Minorities*, International Crisis Group, Europe Report 178, Tbilisi, 2006.

responses in minority enclaves and were viewed through ethnic lenses. In addition, the building of the Kars-Akhalkalaki-Baku railway and the subsequent influx into the region of Turkish and Azeri workers has also been considered as a threat to the well-being and security of the ethnic minority of Javakheti. There is a fear that the economic benefits associated with the railway construction and its subsequent operation will be limited for ethnic Armenians.⁶

From the majority side, the mistrust towards minority communities appeared in relation to the changing international environment. Often, minority communities are perceived to favor the former “colonial master,” as Alexander Rondeli puts it,⁷ and support foreign and security policy priorities that differ from those supported by ethnic Georgians. In many Eastern European countries and in the post-Soviet space as well, minorities have been considered as allies to major powers historically oppressing the majority group. This phenomenon, known as “minoritized majorities,”⁸ defines the threats and the perceptions of majority groups towards the minorities and transfers the minority-majority debate from the human rights and justice perspective to a national security one.

Contributing to this process is the role Russia plays in the post-Soviet space. It effectively seeks to leverage ethnic minority groups against the titular nation, thereby hampering state- and nation-building processes. Russia’s recent invasion of Ukraine confirms the emergence of a clearly formulated foreign and security policy doctrine in connection to the post-Soviet space.⁹ Although this approach is not new, this time it has been articulated more clearly, openly and in radical terms. Russia has expanded its role as a kin to the wider Russian-speaking population of the post-Soviet space and as its “defender” from the titular nation.¹⁰ Apart from more radical means, such as the invasion of South Ossetia and, later on, Ukraine,

6 Премьер министр Грузии посетил Самцхе-Джавакх, 26 мая, 2014. <http://hetq.am/rus/news/54814/premer-ministr-gruzii-posetil-samckhe-dzhavakhk.html>

7 Alexander Rondeli, “The Russian-Georgian War and its Implications for Georgia’s State-building,” *The Making of Modern Georgia, 1918-2012. The First Georgian Republic and its Successors*. Edited by Stephen F. Jones, Routledge, 2014, p. 35.

8 For more about “minoritized majorities” see Will Kymlicka, “Justice and Security in the Accommodation of Minority Nationalism,” *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Minority Rights*. Edited by Stephen May, Tariq Modood and Judith Squires; Cambridge, 2004, p. 155.

9 Alexander Rondeli, “The Russian-Georgian War and its Implications for Georgia’s State-building,” *The Making of Modern Georgia, 1918-2012. The First Georgian Republic and its Successors*. Edited by Stephen F. Jones, Routledge, 2014, p. 41.

10 Lyudmila Alexandrova, “Russia Keeps Pressing for Reunification of the ‘Russian World,’” April 2, www.en.itar-tass.com/opinions/1723.

other ways to expand control is employing the soft power and provision of Russian passports to the citizens of neighboring states. Against the background of these developments, with the significant Russian propaganda the existence of Russian and Armenian passports among the minority communities of Georgia has especially contributed to the securitization of the ethnic issue and has recently created an unhealthy debate in the nationwide media.

The Georgian experience from 2008 and Russia's new foreign and security policy as visible in Ukraine and the post soviet space has created a context whereby citizenship regimes could be used against a state's territory. Regardless of the reasons why minorities in the ethnic enclaves acquire new passports, the increase in the number of foreign citizens in Georgia puts its territorial sovereignty under threat.

Current Issues

The preconditions and circumstances discussed here shape the current discourse on the minority question in Georgia and define the challenges impeding minority integration into the Georgian state. The various challenges are interlinked and are all part of a vicious circle that is hard to overcome. Addressing these problems is heavily dependent on minority-majority joint efforts to eliminate distrust and improve group security as the conflicting threat perceptions hamper the democratic process of debate.

Among the most visible issues hampering minority integration into the socio-political life of the country is the limited knowledge of the Georgian language, a deficiency that limits minority participation in decision-making and hinders social mobility. Language is a vital basis for ethnic identity in the Caucasus and ethnic Georgians attach considerable significance to it. Despite the ardent determination of Saakashvili's government to push forward state language programs, the resources were inadequate and policies inconsistent. Although, overall, the attitude towards the state language has changed in a positive way, the level of proficiency achieved in secondary schools is not sufficient for equal opportunities and competition. In addition, minorities frequently do not see how language knowledge would contribute to their well-being in the near future.

Several years ago, researchers linked a poor command of Georgian with limited access to higher education. However, the situation has changed positively following the introducing of the 1+4 program in 2010. Through the mentioned program the number of young representatives of minority

communities entering higher educational institutions has increased. The number of ethnic Azeri students from Kvemo Kartli who have passed nationwide exams has increased from 163 in 2010 to 587 in 2013 while from Samtskhe-Javakheti, the figures jumped from 96 in 2010 to 139 in 2013.¹¹ Creating a critical mass of minority community representatives graduating from Georgian educational institutions would definitely have a positive effect on the integration efforts.

The information vacuum is another serious issue resulting from the lack of language knowledge. The limited activity of Georgian media outlets in the minority enclaves hampers social cohesion and integration. The only Russian language TV channel PIK was closed down after the Georgian Dream coalition came to power while the translation of the Georgian Public Broadcaster's (GPB) evening news into local languages is not sufficient to make up for other deficiencies. Closure of the PIK channel had a very negative effect as the only alternative to Russian propaganda Russian language television ceased to broadcast in minority regions of Georgia. Due to the lack of news from Tbilisi in languages comprehensible for minority communities, the minorities cannot balance the Russian propaganda regarding developments in Ukraine, as well as Russia's anti-western sentiments with alternative sources, what increases the information gap between majority-minority communities of Georgia especially in the field of national security and foreign policy.

The lack of good governance practices, which translates into low rates of participation in decision-making and limited political activism, is another issue common for minority enclaves directly linked with the lack of the language knowledge and access to information. Minority representatives are not represented at the central level, neither in the public administration nor in political parties. Mainstream political parties do not appeal to minority issues in their election campaigns nor have they campaigned in minority enclaves (so far only with a few exceptions), using an argument that the regions have been the domain of the party in power.¹² The inclusion of minority community representatives, in most cases local authorities, in the governing party lists and their subsequent participation in the parliament is also nominal.

¹¹ www.naec.ge

¹² Eka Metreveli and Jonathan Kulick, *Social Relations and Governance in Javakheti, Georgia*, PDCI, 2009, pp. 20-21.

Conclusion

The legacies of nationality policies in Georgia have influenced the state of affairs of minority enclaves and encouraged mutual distrust among the majority and minority communities, contributing to the securitization of the issue which is becoming especially acute due to the emergence of Russia's aggressive foreign and security policy in the post-Soviet space.

In order to decrease the vulnerability of Georgia's ethnic minorities to outside interference, it is important to introduce mechanisms for the inclusion of minority interests into the realm of domestic politics and push forward policies aimed at national unity. In this context it is imperative to take specific aggressive steps to counter the Russian media propaganda in the ethnic enclaves creating alternative to it informational flow.

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