

National Minorities and the State in Georgia

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Conference Report
August 2006



*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute
Silk Road Studies Program*

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“National Minorities and the State in Georgia” is a publication of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program.

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Distributed in North America by:

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Foreword

This report details the proceedings of a Conference organized by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program in cooperation with the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, in Tbilisi, Georgia, in late June 2006. The Conference followed a workshop on national minorities in Georgia conducted at the Joint Center's Uppsala offices in May 2006. Both events took place within the larger framework of a research project financed by the Folke Bernadotte Academy. The project covers the wider topic of Conflict Management and Ethnic Relations in the South Caucasus, with a particular focus on seeking avenues for future dialogue and confidence building

Participants in the conference included representatives of the Georgian government, academia and think tanks, minority NGO groups and international organizations with field representation in Georgia.

The purpose of the conference was to discuss the relationship between the Georgian State and Georgian national minorities and to identify fruitful ways of increasing the dialogue between the government and minority representatives, with the ultimate aim of conflict prevention. The conference was divided into four sessions, the two first representing in turn the perspective of the Georgian regions, in particular those compactly settled by minorities, and the perspective of the central government structures. The following two panels dealt specifically with the issues of minority political participation and education reform.

This project was made possible by a grant from the Folke Bernadotte Academy, as well as through the fruitful cooperation between the Joint center and GFSIS.

Svante Cornell

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Introduction

The Conference on ‘Minorities and the Georgian State’, co-hosted by the Central Asia – Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program and the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, took place on 29 June 2006 at the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies in Tbilisi. The event marked the end of a research project on ‘Conflict Management and Ethnic Relations in the South Caucasus’, funded by the Swedish Folke Bernadotte Academy and carried out between October 2005 and June 2006. The aim of the project was to identify constructive venues for future dialogue and confidence building on minority issues in the region, with the ultimate goal of improving the relationship between the South Caucasian governments and national minorities. Thus, the conference brought together representatives from the Georgian government, members of national minority groups, local and international organizations and representatives of the local and international academia, to discuss the government-minorities relationship and policies in relation to participation, shaping of a national identity, language and education.

Opening Remarks

In his opening remarks, Mr. Temuri Yakobashvili, Executive Vice President of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, emphasized the importance of providing government and minority representatives with the opportunity to share their views on visions and solutions as regards shaping the future nation of Georgia and noted that external actors, such as international organizations, play important parts in bringing relevant actors together.

Mr. Yakobashvili noted that over the past fifteen years, large parts of the population have not sufficiently participated in the state building process in the country and that attempts by the government to include minorities in state structures have so far proved unsuccessful. He drew attention to the tendency to label minority groups as separatists and noted that this in part is due to attempts by some groups to abuse the concept of ethnic identity. Mr. Yakobashvili ended his introduction by stating that at present, the problems

faced by national minorities are inadequately addressed and that a precondition for successful state building is a democratic Georgia where all interests are considered.

Session 1 - The Regional Perspective

The first session of the conference was dedicated to the situation for national minorities inhabiting the regions of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli. Thus, representatives from both regions were provided with the opportunity to present their views on the current problems in the regions, and on the relationship between the central government and members of national minority groups.

Addressing the situation in the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti, Mr. Ararat Darbinyan, Head of the Javakheti Citizen Forum, noted that few problems faced by the region's minorities have been resolved. The population, which to a large extent consists of ethnic Armenians, suffers greatly from isolation and its knowledge of the Georgian language is generally poor. The socio-economic situation is difficult and results in continuing emigration from the region. Little is done by the central authorities to break down local clan structures, who continue to have a significant influence on local affairs. Mr. Darbinyan drew attention to the alienation of the population of Javakheti in relation to the rest of Georgia but also pointed out that there are internal divisions in Javakheti that contribute to socio-economic isolation of certain groups within the region as well. While a common assumption is that the population of Javakheti demands autonomous status of the region, in reality the general public is critical to those political organizations voicing separatist claims.

Mr. Darbinyan pointed out that the main concern in the Javakheti region is the lack of knowledge of the Georgian language among the population, caused by a history of inadequate language teaching. The language barriers result in difficulties for members of minorities to effectively participate in decision-making processes, as the present law stipulates that Georgian is the administrative language of the country. While the requirement of using Georgian in all administrative procedures has so far merely been a formality, this practice is now changing resulting in a lack of representation of ethnic Armenians within the official structures of the country. Mr. Darbinyan expressed skepticism to the notion that members of minority groups in Samtskhe-Javakheti are unwilling to learn the Georgian language and

stressed that it is necessary to provide the population with incentives for learning Georgian, through granting it de facto possibilities to participate in public life. He suggested that the Armenian language, which in practice is already used as the language of communication in local administration bodies, should be allowed until the population is brought up to a satisfactory level of knowledge of Georgian.

Mr. Darbinyan ended his presentation of the situation in Samtskhe-Javakheti by emphasizing the importance of bringing actors together for discussions on how to resolve existing problems in the region.

Mr. Kiliak Iordanov, Representing the Greek Community, opened his presentation by stating that radical changes are underway in Georgia and that the country is gaining international respect. Little attention is however paid to inter-ethnic relations, largely due to a tendency to take pride in years of peaceful co-existence.

Mr. Iordanov suggested that gaps in the legislative sphere need to be filled, preferably through adopting a law on national minorities, and that the government should be more attentive to information provided by national minority groups about their problems and needs. He also drew attention to the information vacuum in the regions of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli and thus, that central policies are not communicated properly to the Georgian population. He suggested that in order to prevent distrust among the population of the Georgian regions against the central authorities, the Government needs to take active steps as regards integrating minorities into the Georgian information sphere.

Addressing issues that affect the Greek minority in Georgia specifically, Mr. Iordanov spoke about the housing situation in Tsalka, a region in Kvemo Kartli inhabited by approximately 1500 ethnic Greeks. The relocation of migrants from the regions of Ajaria and Svaneti to abandoned houses in Tsalka is perceived among the population as unjust occupation of property belonging to emigrated ethnic Greeks. Mr. Iordanov suggested that there is a need for increased dialogue between the central authorities and the Greek minority on this issue. Furthermore, he addressed the issue of land privatization in Kvemo Kartli, which tends to discriminate certain minority groups are thereby breaches human rights standards.

Ms. Sabina Talibova, who addressed the situation of the population of Kvemo Kartli (largely populated by ethnic Azeris, author's note), expressed

skepticism against the current language policies through stating that more time is required for the population to reach a satisfactory level of knowledge of the Georgian language before demanding the use of the state language in the public sphere. She also spoke about the land privatization and the halting dialogue between the central authorities and the local population on this issue. Furthermore, she expressed concerns about the lack of representation of ethnic Azeris in the local government structures, and the difficulties for non-ethnic Georgians to participate in decision-making, due to the requirement of knowing Georgian to work in the public sector.

In a discussion that followed the initial three presentations, it was noted that there is a lack of reliable migration data in Georgia and thus, that it is problematic to determine the correlation between the limited access for minority members to higher education and emigration of ethnic minorities to neighboring countries. Furthermore, the participants drew attention to the significance of the Zurab Zvania School of Public Administration in the context of integration but it was also noted that the special education offered to minority members through the ZSPAS does not necessarily guarantee employment and thus, that it appears premature to evaluate the success of this initiative at this early stage.

Session 2 - The Governmental Perspective

During the second panel of the conference, representatives from the central government were given the opportunity to respond to issues brought forward in the first panel and overall, to deliver their views on the relationship between the central administration and national minority groups.

Ms. Bela Tsipuria, Deputy Minister of Education and Sciences, opened her presentation by stating that a successful policy for integration is needed in order to build a democratic state. Ms. Tsipuria acknowledged the fact that parts of the Georgian population are not adequately integrated into the Georgian information sphere but noted at the same time that the government is inclined towards the inclusion of such groups.

Ms. Tsipuria went on to argue that since Georgia is a linguistically diverse country, special mechanisms aimed at protecting the state language are required. She compared the situation in Georgia to that of the Baltic states, where efforts to integrate Russian-speaking minorities have been successful,

but noted at the same time that Georgia has not had the same level of donor assistance for integration of linguistically diverse minority groups. Ms. Tsipuria drew attention to the importance of maintaining a balance between the promotion of the state language and the rights of national minorities but noted that linguistic integration is in accordance with international minority rights law. Furthermore, the Deputy Minister pointed out that the state curriculum does not preclude the use or teaching of minority languages and that minority language schools continue to receive financial support from the state. Ms. Tsipuria noted that the legacy of promoting Russian as the *lingua franca* has created an information vacuum in the country and created barriers between national groups. The current policies of promoting the state language are attempts to overcome such barriers and to prevent further emigration from the country. The Deputy Minister emphasized the difference between the situation as regards minority policies in Georgia and other states, as the currently most pressing priority in Georgia is to promote the state language, rather than to protect the use of minority languages.

Ms. Tsipuria noted that recent education reforms have been successful and thus, that the present education system generally provides for adequate teaching standards. There is still however a shortage of updated textbooks in regional schools and many teachers do not have sufficient knowledge of the Georgian language. In order to improve the standard of teaching in the regions, training projects aimed at bringing teachers up to a satisfactory level of knowledge of the state language have been launched in the regions of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli. In summarizing the positive components of the current education policies as regards national minorities, Ms. Tsipuria moreover mentioned the Zurab Zvania School of Public Administration, where members of national minorities are trained for work in public affairs. The Deputy Minister also drew attention to the positive implications of the newly introduced national exams, obligatory for access to higher education. The exams provide for increased transparency and thus, prevent corruption in the University admission processes. The ultimate aim is to provide minorities with equal access to higher education, and this is done through offering members of national minority groups special programs in which they are prepared for the exams, and special grants are offered to members of certain minority groups to finance their education.

Mr. Guram Svanidze, representing the Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights and Civic Integration, noted that the state in the past has failed to

provide for a unified and coherent strategy for integration. Whereas efforts were made to preserve the ethnic identity of national minority groups, for instance through offering education in minority languages, little was done in terms of ensuring that minorities are fully integrated into the Georgian state. He noted that it is problematic to eliminate the consequences of such policies but stressed that positive steps are taken with regards to promoting the state language and that the national focus on minority issues is increasing.

Mr. Temur Lomsadze, representing the State Ministry for Conflict Resolution, emphasized the importance of meetings in which minority issues are addressed, particularly those focusing on conflict prevention, which he considered a priority for the government. He noted that although minorities have inhabited Georgia for centuries, inadequate policies in the minority field have resulted in violations of the country's territorial integrity. At present, ethnic tensions are not as notable as in the 1990s, but since the Rose Revolution there is a tendency to downscale existing controversies. He noted that if minorities continue to lack representation in the state structures, one may witness an increase of ethnic tensions in the country.

As regards the situation in Samtskhe-Javakheti, Mr. Lomsadze noted that key issues to address range from teaching of the state language to continuing labour emigration and a high poverty level. In order to regulate the wide range of minority issues, it is desirable that a law on national minorities is adopted which will impose concrete obligations upon the Georgian state in many different spheres. There is also a need for poverty reduction efforts, as economic hardships throughout Georgia provide for a nourishing ground for ethnic tensions and potentially; conflicts. Furthermore, it is necessary that the government raises awareness on legislative changes among the population of Samtskhe-Javakheti, and overall, to integrate the region's population into the Georgian information sphere. Mr. Lomsadze pointed out that current projects carried out in the Georgian regions tend to overlap each other, as there is a lack of coordination of integration efforts within the central structures. Thus, it is desirable that the government establishes a steering body for minority issues and moreover, elaborates a unified concept for integration.

The Special Advisor to the President on Integration, Ms. Ana Zvania, agreed with previous speakers that it is essential for the government to create a unified strategy for integration. Ms. Zvania noted that cooperation between state bodies and minority representatives is required in order to ensure

constructive progress in this regard and that there is a need for continuing meetings and discussions regarding the problems faced by national minorities. She stressed that in order to cover all aspects of minority related problems and issues, it is important to involve the public in the overall debate. Ms. Zvania suggested that there is also a need to lay down accurate objective indicators in order to be able to account for problems and successes in the minority field. Moreover she stressed that it is unreasonable to hope for progress as regards gaining the confidence of minority members overnight, but that the government is inclined to solve present problems faced by national minority groups.

The discussion that followed the presentations during session 2 concerned the lack of awareness about the education reforms in the regions. The government suggested that local organizations and media should play a more active role in raising awareness on central policies and that the central administration can not take sole responsibility for civic education in the Georgians regions.

Session 3

The third panel was devoted to problems connected with the lack of minority participation in political processes due to a weak notion of citizenship in the Georgian state. The session focused on the implications of different approaches toward conceptualizing nation and nationhood. These issues were addressed by Dr. Jonathan Wheatley, who gave an introduction to the theoretical approach towards conceptualizing nationhood through the dichotomy of civic and ethnic nationalism applied to the Georgian context, and of past and current approaches toward accommodating national minorities within the Georgian state.

Dr. Wheatley argued that the manner in which national diversity is accommodated within the boundaries of a state depends on the interrelationships between state, citizen and nation. First, the accommodation of national diversity is dependent on the relationship between the citizen and the nation in terms of how national identity is ascribed to and assumed by the individual. The “symbols” of the nation assume a central role in this respect, such as language, cultural artifacts, religion and national myths, granting the individual points for identification with the nation. Second, it depends on how citizenship is understood, or on

how the relation between state and citizen is conceptualized. Third, it is dependent on the relationship between nationalism and the state, in that nationalisms can assume different forms, broadly classified as state-framed and counter-state nationalism.

According to Dr. Wheatley, states accommodate national minorities in three principal ways: Through exclusion, where states employ ethnic criteria for citizenship and where national minorities are, to a greater or lesser extent, excluded from public life. Second, members of national minorities may be accepted as full citizens, but are expected to assimilate and adopt a set of national symbols that are closely associated with the majority nationality. The third and final way is shared citizenship, where all citizens, irrespective of nationality, participate in public life and identify with symbols, values and norms that are not deemed as biased towards any particular national group.

In the former Soviet Union, national boundaries were demarcated in a manner which allowed “nations” to be perceived as territorially bounded entities and ascribed a titular nation. Nationality was made a category for bureaucratic classification of all individuals and an official national language was established, along with a national culture and national historiography. Nationality thus became understood in terms of territory and language and as a bureaucratic category that, for individual citizens, became the main point of identification. The nationalities policy of the USSR created a link between the national group and its territory, but not between the individual and the territory. No attempts were made to create any kind of civic nationality linked to the national territory in which one lived.

Consequences of the Soviet nationalities policy are quite visible in today’s Georgia. The term Georgian denotes membership of an ethnic Georgian community and not citizenship of the Georgian state. The idea of “titular nationality” reinforced the idea of each national territory in the USSR as being the homeland for one exclusive nationality, a principle increasingly referred to from the late 1980s in branding non-Georgians as guests on Georgian territory, thus incapable of acquiring full Georgian citizenship. Furthermore, the Georgian language retains the defining role of what it means to be Georgian and it is, according to Dr. Wheatley, difficult to imagine a Georgian nation capable of accommodating those who do not speak the Georgian language.

Citizenship was a narrow category in the USSR that excluded any meaningful influence over state affairs. However, the near state collapse of

the early 1990s further weakened the notion of citizenship in Georgia, and turned this into an almost meaningless concept. This was valid for all inhabitants of Georgia; ethnic Georgians were half – citizens, while national minorities were hardly citizens at all. The informational vacuum in relations between most non-Georgian communities and Georgian authorities reinforced the neglect experienced by all rural communities in Georgia and deprived all members of Georgian society, but especially those belonging to national minorities, of citizenship in a substantive sense.

In the first years after independence, the dominant state approach towards accommodation of national minorities was that of exclusion, barring members of ethnic minorities from citizenship in a substantive sense. The fact that minorities have been disproportionately excluded can be traced back to factors that were conditioned by the Soviet legacies identified; the bureaucratization of nationality, the privileged status of titular nationalities, the discourse of homeland and the key role of language as a symbol of national identity.

Since the Rose revolution of 2003, there has been a new emphasis on “civic nationalism”, based on the notion that all citizens, irrespective of nationality, have the right to participate fully in public life. However, Dr. Wheatley argues, certain tendencies towards minority accommodation through assimilation can be observed within the new policy direction. The main marker of the new “civic” identity is the Georgian language, serving as the basis for national integration. Moreover, cultural markers that are to define the civic national identity are predominately ethnically Georgian. Priority given to Georgian national symbols thus still prevails. The new policy therefore appears to reflect a shift in the approach toward accommodation of minorities from “exclusion” to “assimilation”, rather than shared citizenship. There are, according to Dr. Wheatley, no signs of an ability on part of the state to distinguish between the symbols of an ethnic nation and those of a civic one. Neither is there an appreciation of the need to establish a new identity less based on ethnically biased symbols.

Dr. Wheatley concluded that the lack of any kind of “shared identity of citizens” the absence of effective and reliable state institutions and the legacy of weak citizenship inherited from the Soviet Union make it unlikely that loyalty to the civic community will overcome ethnically based group loyalties in the near future.

Dr. Wheatley's presentation was followed by Mr. Arnold Stepanian, representing Public Movement – Multinational Georgia. Mr. Stepanian pointed out that the lack of focus on minority participation during the process of state building provides an explanation to why 16% of Georgian citizens currently do not have the opportunity of taking part in political processes in Georgia. According to Mr. Stepanian, Georgian society found itself at risk of disruption in the early 1990s, which had a clear and lasting effect in both the regions compactly settled by minorities, Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli, and in the break-away regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. While the crisis led to the ousting of the Georgian population from Abkhazian and South Ossetian territory, the effect in the regions of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli were an ousting of Armenians and Azeris from Georgian political and social life.

The ethnically nationalist period of the early 1990s gave rise to a rift within Georgian society, where Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli started developing their own communities to alleviate their situation and preserve their cultural identity. Mr. Stepanian pointed out that it is questionable whether one can speak of state building in a meaningful way under such circumstances. Started out as the forming of various NGOs, these regions developed a political life of their own, lacking connection to the Georgian state and containing regional parties and political groups. The main function of these forms of political activity was to preserve the cultural identities of national minorities.

Mr. Stepanian stated that these processes were initiated by Zviad Gamsakhurdia and continued under the rule of Eduard Shevardnadze, during which state building was initiated. In Mr. Stepanian's words, none of these presidents directed attention to the social and political exclusion of national minorities in the Georgian state. The current government quite recently realized the problematic nature of this situation and started developing policies more acceptable to minorities.

However, previous political experiments were never aimed at providing minorities with full citizenship and proper participation in political life. Rather, there has been a tendency to regard minorities as an untrustworthy fifth column which has mainly been addressed and cared for during elections, in order to provide the ruling party with votes.

Mr. Stepanian described Georgian society of today as divided. While the urban Georgian population is oriented towards integration with transatlantic

institutions, compactly settled minorities were described as displaying a similar soviet oriented way of thinking as was the norm fourteen years ago. Until the Rose revolution, ethnicity was the primary criteria for assessing the competence and agenda of politicians during elections.

Mr. Stepanian stated that until now, very few initiatives have been taken aimed at addressing the problems faced by national minorities. However, it seems as though the current government is actually forming an approach toward these issues, which gives reason for some optimism regarding the future.

However, Mr. Stepanian pointed out that the Georgian state faces immense challenges in breaking the, partly self-imposed, isolation of national minorities from the state. It was stated that minority representatives in parliament have never exceeded 6%, that representatives in local government in mixed regions is extremely low and that minority participation in the Georgian army is practically non-existent. Overall, there is a strong tradition of ethnocentrism and clan influence over local political practices in minority regions. In regions where minorities actually occupy posts in local government, such as in Javakheti, there is a high clan presence in local governance structures. In Kvemo Kartli, however, practically no Azeri representatives occupy posts in local governance. Language tests required for public employment have been applied quite randomly and many applicants did not acquire positions even though they demonstrated a good knowledge of the language, which according to Mr. Stepanian constitutes evidence that ethnicity is a more important criteria for eligibility to public employment than knowledge of the state language.

Mr. Stepanian concluded that national minorities in Georgia must be provided with means for taking part in political life and for actively engaging in national political processes. Affirmative action is, in this view, the only sustainable measure which can provide national minorities with a satisfactory influence.

Mr. Irakli Kasrashvili continued through presenting the activities of Mercy Corps related to the problems of national minorities, and of the community mobilization program under implementation in Samtskhe-Javakheti. However, Mr. Kasrashvili also identified a number of obstacles to active civil society participation among the inhabitants of the region. Of these, the daily economic hardships and financial problems faced by most locals were deemed an impediment to societal engagement, since the pressure of

managing economically leaves people with very little energy to focus on anything else. Also, isolation and the encouragement of political inactivity which was the norm during Soviet times were still deemed as very much present in the region. Other than that, the brain drain caused by a constant outflow of young, able people and the language barrier provides additional impediments. Also, even though attempts have been made at providing information in the regional language on political developments in the country, availability of information was still considered quite insufficient, constituting a barrier to interaction and exchange with the rest of Georgian society.

Mr. Zaur Khalilov provided an account of the development of rifts in interethnic relations where it was stated that the division of Georgian society was commenced before Georgia gained independence. Many minorities in Georgia opposed the idea of parting Georgia from the Soviet Union and becoming an independent state. In Mr. Khalilov's view, the fear of aggressive nationalism on part of both minorities and majority caused a lasting division within Georgian society, which stayed in place during the rule of Eduard Shevardnadze. Shevardnadze's approach of balancing political interests against each other also applied the practice of promoting the power of loyal clans in areas settled by minorities in order to maintain stability in these regions. Clan influence was, according to Mr. Khalilov, used as the primary tool for communication between government and minorities, and as a means of maintaining loyalty of minorities toward the ruling party. However, Mr. Khalilov pointed out that the pursuance of state policy through clans were a highly incorrect and inadequate means of promoting interethnic relations. In fact, the effect was a practically non-existent interaction between minorities and the Georgian state, and a signal to these minorities that they did not count as Georgian citizens. In this view, Georgian minority policy under Shevardnadze was extraordinarily short sighted and lacked any realistic chance of including minorities in political processes. The governments of neighboring Armenia and Azerbaijan contributed to the lack of political awareness through consistently encouraging Georgia's Armenian and Azeri populations to vote for the ruling party during times of election.

Mr. Khalilov moved on to assess current especially problematic issues in minority regions, which can be considered a heritage of the neglect toward these minorities during Georgian statehood. Members of national minority groups frequently emigrate to their historical homelands. The ethnopolitical

conflicts of the early 1990s have left a lasting sense of fear among minorities toward the prospects of being regarded as traitors and increased interethnic tension. According to Mr. Khalilov, members of national minorities frequently experience a demand for loyalty toward the government in order not to be regarded enemies of the Georgian state. It was stated that this depiction has been ascribed to minority members engaged in opposition parties. A similar example has been the government reception of complaints voiced by inhabitants of Kvemo Kartli on problems connected to the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, where these have been interpreted as signs of disloyalty toward the state. Mr. Khalilov stated that there is a clear lack of both dialogue on problems experienced by minorities and channels for communicating fears and experienced problems to Georgian authorities.

Mr. Khalilov also addressed the issue of minority representation in state structures, where it was stated that the parliament before the Rose revolution contained minority representatives who did not speak Georgian and had little possibilities or ambitions of addressing problems of the regions they represented. The current parliament contains Georgian speaking minority MPs, but are according to Mr. Khalilov only represented because they belong to national minorities and have neither competence, nor ambitions to constitute a parliamentary voice on the problems experienced by Georgia's minorities. Also, minority representation in local governance structure in Kvemo Kartli is practically non existent, while that of Samtskhe-Javakheti has several Armenian senior officials.

Mr. Khalilov stated that the only sustainable alternative to current conditions is to help creating new elites among young, educated people which will constitute a credible alternative to the traditional rule of clans. Mr. Khalilov requested increased competition among minority representatives in order to discern capable ones. In addition, it was stated that participation in political social life must be made more attractive to minorities and these must be provided with necessary instruments for independently taking part in electoral processes and for discerning between candidates and parties during elections. Finally, Mr. Khalilov stressed the importance of not regarding these problems as exclusively linked to national minority populations, but that the mentioned issues must necessarily be dealt with in a wider perspective, addressing problems common to the entire Georgian state.

Mr. Alexander Rusetski ascribed current obstacles to addressing issues related to minorities to a conflict in analysis between the government and national minorities, where there is a clear reluctance of viewing diversity as something beneficial. Georgia's population is traditionally divided into Georgians and non-Georgians. According to Mr. Rusetski, the composition of Georgian society is far more complex than usually acknowledged. For instance, few politicians have an actual knowledge of how many ethnic groups Georgia is composed of. Diasporas are part of this equation and add to its complexity.

Mr. Rusetski remarked that one hardly ever hears any mention of mixed families, but that interethnic issues are discussed based on assumptions of very clear-cut division lines between ethnic groups. It was noted that many ultranationalist leaders come from ethnically mixed families and that it is necessary to study the psychological aspects of ethnicity in order to understand the complexity of ethnically mixed societies. However, it was remarked that the existence of mixed families also constitute a measure of societal tolerance.

Stressing the importance of distinguishing between ethnic and civic identity and allowing for these to coexist, Mr. Rusetski argued that conflict emerges when people are denied the possibility of combining identities, and of identifying with more than one culture. Civic rights must be granted prevalence over ethnically based group rights, but the state must also ensure the means and rights for minorities to protect their culture and identity in order to provide citizens with diverse options of self-identity.

Mr. Rusetski exemplified this reasoning with the crises emerging in the late 1980s, when the crumbling of the Soviet Union allowed nationalist movements to gain momentum and support in several Soviet republics, eventually leading to the collapse of the USSR. These nationalist movements often strived to create conditions for identification where only one choice remained, creating unsustainable conditions not least for Russians and Russian citizens living in various parts of the USSR. In Georgia, the turn to aggressive nationalisms in a country rich in nationalities, where mutually exclusive national projects were pursued, provided for an unavoidable clash between these nationalisms.

The model of language teaching presented by Ms. Tsipuria was questioned, as this was not considered a cure for symptoms, rather than actual problems and that the stress on the importance of state language is above all a heritage

of the Soviet Union. Mr. Rusetski argued that until ethnic diversity is viewed as a resource, reforms in education policy will change nothing, and that the lasting phobias between ethnic groups is the primary problem to address.

Mr. Rusetski finally remarked that not all minorities in Georgia are non-Georgians and that, in Abkhazia, Georgians and Megrelians are discriminated while the Georgian population of Akhalkalaki faces quite a difficult situation as a small minority.

The presentations were followed by a discussion, where it was remarked that even though large sums of money have been spent on integration projects in Samtskhe-Javakheti, these have been carried out in a haphazard manner and lack efficiency and concrete results. It was therefore requested that implementing non governmental and international organizations coordinate their efforts and speed up the implementation process. It was also argued that the lack of information and communication between local politicians and government bodies seriously hampers the implementation of government policies. One participant claimed that the government devotes too much energy to downplaying the actual problems in government – minority relations and to pursuing policies that it knows are largely flawed.

A large part of the discussion focused on the continued influence of clans and on their role as power brokers largely representing their own interests. It was argued that an introduction of local governance which is developed and elected from the grassroots level, as opposed to one appointed from Tbilisi, would counteract the influence of clans in minority areas. Also, the discussion again focused on the importance of new elites among national minorities. One participant stressed the importance of providing means for the creation of these new elites and that, if this is done in a determined manner, new elites are likely to form themselves. However, it was deemed likely that clan elites will devote much energy into maintaining their influence and that the creation of new elites may encounter resistance in this regard. The participants underlined both the importance of minority participation in Georgian political processes and that minorities must be represented also in opposition and not only the ruling party which has been the case since Georgian independence. In this sense, it was said that minority representatives must develop politically and get involved in debates on problems of the entire Georgian state. Political maturity was, however, not only perceived to be lacking among minority representatives, but also among

Georgian MPs, which are arguably not very active in addressing these problems.

It was also suggested that the term “minority” is replaced with “community”, as “minority” has come to carry quite negative connotations in Georgia and provides a division line in Georgian society. “Community” is to be considered more neutral and useful in the sense that it signals respect and tolerance between ethnic groups.

The issue of Georgians as a minority in Samtskhe-Javakheti was raised again, and it was argued that Georgians face problems participating in local governance, since the need for clan connections for admittance to these posts provides a barrier to Georgians wishing to pursue such careers. Also, it was argued that Georgians in this region are facing problems being admitted to higher education and in protecting their cultural identity.

Session 4

The fourth session, marking the conclusion of the conference, focused on a highly sensitive and debated issue in current government-minority relations: the ongoing education reform and in particular its increased emphasis on promoting the Georgian language in minority regions. These reforms are described by the government as an absolute necessity, and as being a precondition for durable state building and national integration of minority regions where very few have a command of the Georgian language. At the same time, the education reforms are frequently perceived with suspicion among minority communities as there is a fear that the increased emphasis on the state language might seek to replace the mother tongue of these minorities and hence as representing an attempt to assimilate minority communities, rather than granting their cultures a place of their own in the Georgian state. While most involved actors recognize a need for Georgian citizens to speak the Georgian language, it is frequently argued that the promotion of state language needs to be balanced against the protection of minority languages and that bilingualism in some form is the only sustainable solution in a tolerant multinational state.

The fourth session was opened by Dr. Jonathan Wheatley, who presented a recent paper on the existing legal framework for language use in public administration, the linguistic implications of the ongoing education reform and their practice in minority regions, especially focusing on the Javakheti region in southern Georgia.

Dr. Wheatley started off with an overview of Georgian legislation on language use in state institutions. Georgian legislation grants status to Georgian as state language and the language used for proceedings in all Georgian administrative units outside Abkhazia. The same principle applies to court proceedings, albeit individuals involved in court proceedings are entitled to an interpreter. Furthermore, existing legislation allows for dismissal of officials in local governance lacking an adequate knowledge of the state language.

The recently adopted legislation on general and higher education grants the right of general education in native language to Georgian citizens who do not speak Georgian. However, the law also stipulates that these schools must follow the new national curriculum, requiring that Georgian language and literature along with the history and geography of Georgia shall be taught in Georgian by the academic year of 2010-2011 at the latest. In adopted laws on higher education, it is envisaged that the language of instruction is Georgian, while it also permits instruction in other languages, provided this is agreed with the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia. Laws on higher education also establishes national entrance examinations in Georgian for all state-accredited education institutions, including a Georgian language test.

In administrative organs of the Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts (together constituting the Province of Javakheti), Armenian and Russian are widely used despite the provisions in the Administrative Code, providing for Georgian as the official language in local administration. In local courts and the prosecutor's office, the minimal knowledge of Georgian has made Russian the main language used in written documentation a necessity, again breaching Georgian administrative law. Court proceedings are frequently delayed, since province-level courts can decide to reject protocols that are not in Georgian.

Dr. Wheatley stated that the persisting informal practices concerning language use in local official bodies provides for inefficiency and discrimination and provides an incentive for corruption. In Javakheti, an informal arrangement has prevailed, in which a local elite of powerful and wealthy Armenians has been allowed to govern the region in return for their support for the centre. At the same time, in a region where command of the Georgian language is very weak among personnel in administrative bodies, a strict observance of laws on state language use is hardly feasible. Moreover, a strict application of the Law on Public Service, in which all officials are

required to have a working knowledge of Georgian, would discriminate against compactly settled minorities, of which very few have a knowledge of the state language, since this would prevent practically all sufficiently qualified local Armenian from public employment.

The new legislation on education has provoked unease among the Armenian population of Javakheti for two principal reasons. First, there is a fear that minorities may be *de facto* discriminated on ethnic grounds, since the time frame for accomplishing a sufficient knowledge of Georgian to follow education in the language is perceived as too short, potentially resulting in Armenian school children receiving a sub-standard education compared to Georgians. A similar argument goes for admission to higher education, since Armenian students are not likely to pass the entrance exams in Georgian and may thus be excluded from the opportunity of attending higher education. Second, the Law on General Education is perceived as a threat to the ethnic identity of the Armenian community. In particular, the clause making it compulsory to learn the history of Georgia in the Georgian language causes fear that Armenian school children might lose their Armenian national identity.

While Dr. Wheatley termed fears of assimilation as exaggerated, he considered it quite likely that the education reforms will turn out to be either ineffective or discriminatory. The reforms may be quietly forgotten, providing for a prevailing informal status of the Armenian language in education. On the other hand, a strict enforcement of the new laws is likely to seriously disadvantage the Armenian population, due to the overtly optimistic timeframe for achieving a sufficient knowledge of the Georgian language among Armenian school children and university students.

Existing legislation is thus, according to Dr. Wheatley, likely to either lead to the persistence of existing informal arrangements, providing for the continued use of non-Georgian languages in bodies of state administration and educational establishments, or to *de facto* discrimination of linguistic minorities. If the latter is the case, policies of the Georgian state may end up violating the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, ratified by the Georgian parliament in 2005.

As a possible solution to the presented problems, Dr. Wheatley elaborated on the option of allowing for the continued use of Armenian, Azeri and Russian within official bodies and educational institutions, at least in the short term. On the one hand, one can argue that allowing for the official use of non-

Georgian languages will legalize informal practices and prevent the language legislation from being used selectively to block opponents to local or national authorities from gaining access to political power. Also, progress to date indicates that it will take at least a generation until a majority of Javakheti Armenians master the Georgian language. The only realistic choices if a functioning official bureaucracy is to be maintained therefore seem to be either keeping the current status quo and informal practices or giving Armenian and Russian some form of official status and allow its status to be regulated by law.

However, a counter-argument is that if state language requirements are dropped, there will be little incentive for the local population to learn it. This is likely to reinforce the isolation of the Armenian and Azeri communities and maintain the current situation, in which no common language exists for communication between majority and minorities. In this sense, giving minority languages an official status locally may counteract the goal of national integration and common citizenship.

Dr. Wheatley presented two ways of resolving this dilemma. First, a minimal and temporary alteration of the existing legal framework could allow for the use of minority languages for a period of time, and of using Russian as a language of communication between central and local authorities, in order to mitigate the most serious side-effects of the existing legislation. This approach will not require giving any official status to minority languages. However, focusing on overcoming short term difficulties provides no direction as to how minority languages are to be accommodated in a longer period of time. As provided by the European Charter on Regional or Minority Languages (which Georgia has undertaken to sign and ratify), national integration is not to be equated with linguistic assimilation and minority languages are not only to be preserved but also allowed to flourish. Also, a temporary use of Russian as a mean for communication between state and local government bodies would do little to assure the development of native minority languages.

Second, some form of administrative status could be given to minority languages at a local level in regions where minorities are concentrated. This would not entail putting these languages on an equal official footing with Georgian, but rather to allow them to be used alongside Georgian on the district and community levels in administrative units where minorities are concentrated. This suggestion is, however not uncontroversial. As mentioned

above, it can be argued that allowing for administrative use of minority languages may hamper the teaching of the state language and hence the project of national integration. It will also potentially put additional administration costs to an already pressed budget through translation costs.

However, Dr. Wheatley stated that the psychological benefits of this approach may well outweigh the counter arguments. Granting minority languages an administrative status will send a clear message to members of national minorities that their languages and cultures are recognized as having a place in the Georgian state, which will dampen perceptions of demands for learning Georgian as a threat to minority cultures and ethnic identities, provide an incentive to learn Georgian and promote participation in civic and political life. Furthermore, while this approach would certainly imply some additional translation costs, current practices at district levels already include translation of documents by bilingual personnel. Translation competence could thus be further expanded through training. Also, while it would be necessary to hire additional translators for service in district administrations, districts where the principle would be applied are so few that the additional cost can be considered as marginal.

According to Dr. Wheatley, the ideal long term scenario would be for minority languages to exist in parallel with Georgian and for bilingualism to become the norm in regions compactly settled by minorities. However, Dr. Wheatley underlined that the suggested approach must neither undermine the status of Georgian as the official state language, nor provide a disincentive to Javakheti Armenians or Kvemo Kartli Azeris to learn Georgian and integrate, and finally it must not provide excessive administrative costs. Dr. Wheatley put forward the example of Romanian policy on minority languages as an example of how similar practices have worked elsewhere.

In Romania, Dr. Wheatley argued, legislative changes have been provided which gives *de facto* administrative status of local administrative status to languages other than Romanian in districts where minorities constitute more than 20% of the population, without altering the status of the Romanian language as the only official language of the country. According to Dr. Wheatley, the main lesson that can be drawn from the Romanian experience is that, despite aggressive nationalist discourse in Romania in the early 90s, and despite the existence of a geographically-concentrated Hungarian minority of the same nationality as a neighboring kin-state and a consequent

fear of secession, concessions can be made to grant some kind of administrative status to minority languages without jeopardizing the status of the majority language as the only official language. Since the Romanian context shares a number of features with the one of Javakheti, Dr. Wheatley concluded that the Romanian experience could be a useful input to developing a way of balancing national integration efforts and the promotion of state language with the rights of minorities to their own cultures and languages.

Dr. Wheatley's presentation gave rise to debate. One participant questioned the proposed approach and stated that it could potentially give rise to new problems, rather than resolving current controversies. He argued that models applied in other contexts may well be interesting inputs to Georgian practices; but that one needs to keep in mind that they may not be easily transferable to the Georgian context. In his view, there is certainly a need for finding a model of bilingualism suitable to the Georgian state, but that the model proposed by Dr. Wheatley, where languages spoken by 20% of the population of a territory are granted an administrative status locally, this would also grant Megrelian and Svan such status. A system where several regions have their own administrative language would arguably be quite hard to manage technically and will not help the national integration of these regions. The participant considered language learning a minor, technical issue within the larger problem of promoting national integration. He remarked that hardly any minorities are working in the media or in the business sector and that if national minorities are granted real incentives for learning the state language, such as income opportunities, this issue will not be as controversial. Language is thus an issue that should be addressed within the larger framework of national integration and other problems in this regard are more pressing.

Dr. Wheatley responded that granting local administrative status to minority languages must not interfere with the status of the state language, and that the proposed model must in no way compromise the importance of providing incentives for learning Georgian. He also remarked that the language problem is not related to minorities *per se*, but primarily to compactly settled minorities, who rarely come across opportunities of practicing Georgian. The learning process in these regions must therefore be allowed to take its time. Also, he argued that the application of the Romanian model will not result in granting all languages some form of official status. It will only be applicable

to units of local governance where 20% of the staff speaks minority languages, applying to ten regions in total; all of these located in the Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli provinces. Dr. Wheatley pointed out that the European Convention on the Protection of Regional and Minority Languages grants some flexibility as regards the issue of which language to protect and that since Svan and Megrelian are not written languages, these are not entitled to protection according to the convention, and will not be granted administrative status. According to the suggested model, administrative status will thus only be granted to Armenian and Azeri.

Another participant emphasized the need for knowing the state language, but also stated that there is currently an overtly optimistic attitude toward language teaching as a means to solve all other problems related to integration. He remarked that minorities with a good knowledge of Georgian also suffer from integration problems, constituting evidence that knowledge of the state language is not sufficient to attain full membership in the Georgian community.

It was also argued that the candidates accepted to higher education from regions compactly settled by minorities are steadily decreasing, due to the increased demands for knowledge of the state language for admission. This was considered a clear motivation for emigration among Georgia's minorities and evidence that the demands for a knowledge of Georgian does not provide incentives, but rather has an exclusionary function, as it represents a barrier to engaging in university studies.

One participant voiced the opinion that a current overemphasis on language diverts attention from the other necessary elements of integration processes. In a recent poll, a majority of Georgia's minority populations stated that they desire to learn the state language. However, while the motivation exists, it was argued that this will not help integration processes much as long as minorities do not feel like fully fledged Georgian citizens. Part of the state budget currently spent on Georgian teaching should therefore be redirected to address the issue of promoting membership in the Georgian state and consequently real incentives for learning Georgian. Since the laws adopted within the education reform have a too narrow and uncompromising focus on the teaching of Georgian, it was argued, the desired results will not be reached and the laws may potentially be counterproductive.

Catching on to this argument, one participant argued that the economical aspects of integration may well constitute the most rewarding way of

generating incentives for learning the state language. The creation of common markets and encouragement of the participation of minorities in Georgian economic life constitutes a logical starting point of national integration and is in turn likely to increase interest among minorities in participating in political processes and society at large.

An inhabitant of Akhalkalaki agreed that in order to acquire a proper knowledge of the Georgian language, the subjects to language teaching must be provided with a rationale for knowing the language. This is the only way of motivating people into embarking on the project of learning a language and cope with the efforts connected to it. Currently, he said, there is a higher interest in minority regions in learning English than Georgian, as this grants superior opportunities. However, he also underlined the importance of allowing for bilingualism since a failure to do so will provoke strong anti-sentiments toward the Georgian language, as minority populations will seek to safeguard their own languages. He argued that if Svans and Megrelians demand the use of their languages in local administrations they should be allowed to do so. In Akhalkalaki, he pointed to a necessity of allowing for official proceedings in both Armenian and Georgian and of flexibility in this regard. The option of bilingualism was considered a necessity for the proper functioning of both court proceedings and local political processes.

A representative from Kvemo Kartli favored on the option of reintroducing Russian as an administrative language and argued that a viable option would be to use Russian as a temporary measure until teaching of Georgian is well underway.

Concluding Remarks

At the end of the session, Mr. Temuri Yakobashvili and Dr. Svante Cornell summed up lessons learned during the conference. Mr. Yakobashvili expressed a high interest on part of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies in a continued engagement with minority and language issues. He further concluded that the opinions voiced during the conference had made it clear that the common denominator of discussed issues is a problem of old and conservative elites among all groups. He therefore proposed that future attention should be directed toward the creation of new elites, especially in areas settled compactly by Azeris and Armenians. As a contribution to this effort, he expressed an ambition of GFSIS to design a training program involving young, potential members of

new elites capable of constructively contributing to Georgian state building processes and national integration. These should preferably also be well acquainted with international aspects of Georgian policy, such as Georgia's orientation toward the EU and NATO, and preferably share state vision in these respects.

Dr. Svante Cornell concluded that the picture has become quite clear on the discussed problems, and that the background of current issues related to national minorities or communities reflects the history of the Soviet Union and Russian rule over the Caucasus. He stated that after Georgia gained its independence, very little progress has been made in the field of national integration and that Georgian authorities have continuously failed to properly address problems related to state building in a multinational state. Armed conflicts have resulted in a atmosphere of mutual suspicion between ethnic groups and a sense of dependence on neighboring countries for internal stability. Dr. Cornell argued that integration is the only way forward, and that Georgian national identity must develop toward the establishment of a civic national core, allowing for membership in the nation regardless of ethnicity.

However, the achievement of civic nationhood will not come easily, Dr. Cornell stated, and is likely to take a long time. The process will touch on several aspects, some of which will require controversial decisions, especially in finding solutions to the current status quo in minority regions, still governed by old, conservative elites. In this respect, advice from outside and experiences from similar processes elsewhere is well needed and will prove useful.

Dr. Cornell considered the current political situation an opportune moment since, for the first time since independence, Georgia has a government with a will and momentum to achieve change. This is an opportunity that should be taken advantage of, not least for donors, international organizations and NGOs that are willing and able to step in and make a difference. However, according to Dr. Cornell, the primary actors in the process of change must be modern ethnic elites, in agreement with Georgian visions of western integration and able to replace clan rule and conservative leadership.

List of Speakers:

1. Svante Cornell, CACI-SRSP
2. Armen Darbinyan, Javakheti Civic Forum
3. Kiliak Iordanov, Greek Community
4. Irakli Kasrashvili, Mercy Corps
5. Zaur Khalilov, Civic Integration Foundation
6. Temur Lomsadze, State Ministry of Conflict Resolution
7. Aleksander Rusetski, Director, South Caucasus Institute of Regional Security
8. Arnold Stepanian, Public Movement Multinational Georgia
9. Guram Svanidze, Committee of Human Rights and Civic Integration, Parliament of Georgia
10. Sabina Talibova, NGO - Mtredi
11. Bela Tsipuria, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Education and Science
12. Jonathan Wheatley, European Centre for Minority Issues
13. Temuri Yakobashvili, GFSIS
14. Ana Zhvania, Adviser to the President on Ethnic Minorities and Integration, Presidential Administration

List of Participants:

1. Ramaz Aptsiauri, UN Association
2. Alibala Askerov, Public Movement - Geirati
3. Ramin Bairamov, Deputy Governor of Gardabani
4. Ketii Bakradze, USAID
5. Zurab Burduli, Georgian Young Lawyers Association
6. David Darchiashvili, Director, Open Society Foundation
7. Ketii Elizbarishvili, European Commission
8. Ararat Esayan, Akhalkalaki
9. Magdalena Frichova, OSCE – Mission to Georgia
10. Giorgi Gogia, International Crisis Group
11. Giorgi Jashi, Council of Europe
12. Eric Jönsson, SIDA
13. Ketii Khutsishvili, Eurasia Foundation
14. Ketii Melikadze, SRC
15. Lali Meskhi, Department for International Development (DFID)
16. Eka Metreveli, GFSIS
17. Beka Mindiashvili, Public Defender’s Office
18. Niklas Nilsson, CACI-SRSP
19. Rosie Nilsson, European Commission
20. Gia Nodia, Director, Caucasus Institute for Peace Democracy and Development
21. Andrea Harris, Eurasia Foundation
22. Ketii Nozadze, International Crisis Group
23. Maria Pettersson, Woman to Woman
24. Johanna Popjanevski, CACI-SRSP
25. Levan Ramishvili, Director, Liberty Institute
26. Giorgi Tarkhan-Mouravi, Institute of Public Policy
27. Claude Zullo, ABA/CEELI