

# Conflict Management and Ethnic Relations in the South Caucasus: National Minorities in Georgia

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Workshop Report  
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*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute*  
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## **Introduction**

A workshop on national minorities in Georgia took place in the Joint Center's Uppsala offices on May 19-20, 2006, 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 included representatives of the Georgian academia, Georgian minority NGO society and international organizations with field representation in Georgia. The workshop, which was part of a research project carried out jointly between the Silk Road Studies Program and the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies between October 2005 and June 2006, was organized and moderated by the Joint Center's Research Director, Dr. Svante E. Cornell and the Project Coordinator, Johanna Popjanevski.

The purpose of the workshop 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 workshop was divided into four sessions, representing in turn the perspective of the Georgian regions, in particular those compactly settled by minorities, the perspective of the central structures and that of the international community and the Georgian civil society. The workshop also intended to provide a framework for the agenda and scope of an upcoming conference in Tbilisi, which constitutes the final stage of the project.

## **The Perspective of the Regions**

The opening theme for discussion was the situation and perceptions of Georgian national minorities, in particular the Armenian and Azeri minorities settled compactly in the regions of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli. Starting out with an account of the historical roots to current problems in government-minority relations in Georgia, it was stated that one of the primary causes to the isolation of minorities in the country was the failure in practice to grant them full status as Georgian citizens after independence and throughout the process of state-building. The lack of participation of minorities in public life, and state's inability to reach out to

its regions has made integration of national minorities a pressing issue in contemporary Georgia.

In an overview of problems faced in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, linguistic problems were defined as one of the issues of primary concern. It was stated that the Armenian population of Javakheti does not acknowledge a need for using the Georgian language, and that the current policy of promoting the state language is perceived in the region as part of a Georgian assimilation policy. In regions compactly settled by minorities, poor teaching conditions and a deep lack of motivation makes it difficult for students to achieve a sufficient knowledge of Georgian in public schools. It was stated that the new education laws are thus likely to be counterproductive, because their rigid demand for knowledge of Georgian in order to attend higher education will provide a further obstacle to the successful integration of minorities into Georgian society. This may also potentially result in increased emigration, since the most talented students belonging to the Armenian and Azeri minorities tend to migrate to other countries after graduation.

Clan influence over the local administration was considered another important problem in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region. It was stated that the 'clans' of Samtskhe-Javakheti are actively struggling with one another to gain control over the local government and are rapidly increasing their influence on this level. It was also considered quite possible that clan members will acquire government and parliament positions within a few years.

The Kvemo Kartli region is more ethnically diverse than Samtskhe-Javakheti, certainly than the Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts constituting Javakheti, and not to the same extent dominated by minorities. However, in most parts of Kvemo Kartli, Azeris constitute 50-80% of the population. As in the case of Samtskhe-Javakheti, the education reform was described as the primary current concern. While the education reform implies that all future schoolbooks will be produced by the Georgian ministry of education, education materials are still imported from Armenia and Azerbaijan which has provided minorities with a perspective of history and geography different from than envisaged in the national curriculum. While the origins of educational materials may seem like a minor issue at first glance, it represents a more far reaching problem in relation to creating a unified nation-state, namely that the teaching of differing perspectives on

history and geography constitutes an obstacle to the creation of a common national identity.

It was pointed out that in Kvemo Kartli, no Azeri has ever been head of local government and thus, Azeris have an even weaker representation in governing structures than the Armenians of Samtskhe-Javakheti. It remains to be seen whether an upcoming local government reform will bring any changes in this regard. While Azeris have traditionally been considered more loyal to the central government than the Armenian minority, dissatisfaction is growing under the surface in Kvemo Kartli and problems of 'clan' influence are similar to those of Samtskhe-Javakheti.

The struggle against organized crime, namely the closing of illegal trade routes between Kvemo Kartli and Azerbaijan, has had a negative impact on the region's economy. While directed against smuggling, such actions have hindered trade in conventional goods and are frequently understood by minorities as directed against them in a discriminatory manner and as an attack on the population's traditional way of life.

As regards the interethnic situation in the breakaway regions it was stated that the conflict in South Ossetia does not carry as heavy ethnic features as the Abkhazian one and has more of a political nature. While South Ossetians and Georgians still interact, in Abkhazia, ethnic consciousness remains strong and ethnic division lines are much clearer. During a recent meeting in Tbilisi, where among other things return of IDPs and economic cooperation was discussed, it became evident that the issue of which ethnic group constitutes the indigenous population of Abkhazia remains a very sensitive one.

The situation of Ossetians living in Georgia was discussed and it was stated that the problems of this minority deserve much more attention than it is presently given. During the rule of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, many South Ossetians fled to regions in the North Caucasus, particularly North Ossetia. Those regions have, however, experienced great difficulties in absorbing refugees and many are still living in what can be deemed a post-conflict situation. The current government has undertaken efforts to repatriate a large numbers of returning refugees, but some workshop participants viewed the measures carried out so far as very inconsistent. However, a law proposal on restitution of property to Ossetians is currently under development.

In relation to migration issues, attention was drawn to the practice of resettling ecological migrants, particularly from Svaneti and Ajaria, to

minority-populated regions in Georgia. During the 1990s this was viewed as a conscious practice on the part of the government aimed at ‘Georgianizing’ the regions. Today, many are skeptical to the resettling of ecological migrants to the isolated region of Tsalka in Kvemo Kartli. A likely reason for this practice is the supply of empty houses left by ethnic Greek emigrants. However, settling ecological migrants in a poor region already populated by ethnic minorities is problematic and has contributed to increasing tensions between ethnic groups.

External relations have an important impact on interethnic relations in Georgia. As regards Azerbaijani influence, the perceived loyalty of Georgia’s Azeri population is in part considered a heritage from the strong ties between former Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze and his Azerbaijani counterpart, the late Heydar Aliyev. However the participants pointed out that a certain distance between Georgia and Azerbaijan has emerged in Kvemo Kartli and that there are noticeable changes in both Azerbaijan’s approach to minorities in Georgia and expressions of discontent among the Azeri minority. Georgia’s relationship with Azerbaijan is thus affecting the perceptions of the Azeri minority towards the Georgian government.

As regards the relationship between the Georgian and Armenian states, participants noted that the Armenian government is displaying concern over Georgia’s relations with Europe and the United States. While Armenia is committed to integrate with these political structures as well, Armenia is reacting to the fact that Georgia is becoming the leading country in integrating with the West and is concerned that this may imply an estrangement of Georgia from the South Caucasian context. However, Armenia remains committed to keeping the situation in Javakheti calm and the only divergence from this line of policy is the Armenian Revolutionary Federation or *Dashnaktsutiun*, a radical Armenian nationalist party with limited following but with close links to the present ruling elite in Armenia.

During the first session, it was also pointed out that the South Caucasus is gradually ceasing to be referred to as the former Soviet Union. Due to an ongoing paradigm shift, the region is now understood as being part of the Black Sea Region, a notion carrying far more positive connotations. It was argued that continued westernization policy remains a most important factor for the region’s future.

When discussing the role of the Orthodox Church in ethnic relations, the problematic relationship between the Georgian and Armenian churches was

brought to the fore. The participants were especially critical towards the tendency of both churches to take part in activities aimed at creating ethnic tensions and consciously bring up issues that undermine interethnic relations. The participants were also critical to the intolerant manner in which the Orthodox Church is approaching the growing number of non-traditional religions in Georgia as it perceives external influences as a threat to traditional Georgian values.

The Orthodox Church is perceived as playing a particular role in the formulation of national identity, since the Orthodox confession is central to the ethnic identification of Georgians. It was considered desirable for the church to use its influence to play a constructive role in addressing national unity and that the church should be encouraged to promote tolerance within the Georgian society.

External influences on Islam in Georgia were described as emanating from four primary channels: Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, and Azerbaijan. The Iranian influence was above all considered important within Shiite Azeri groups, but also to some extent in Tbilisi. Turkish influence, on the other hand, is strong in Ajaria and among Sunnis in general. Saudi Arabian influence was considered growing in Pankisi following the beginning of the second Chechen war. The Azerbaijani influence was considered largest in Tbilisi, but also growing in other regions. At the same time, Azerbaijani Muslims promoting a moderate way of Islam are losing influence due to a lack of resources. Whereas the spheres of these four influences used to have clearly defined boundaries, they are now intruding on each others territory. 70 years of Soviet rule did a great deal to erase religious conscience, but a new generation of young, frustrated people have provided a breeding ground for less moderate interpretations of Islam.

### **The Perspective of the Central Structures**

One participant brought attention the fact that the Georgian government has begun to take important steps to enhance its international obligations as regards minority protection. Recently, a number of international treaties have been ratified, including the European Social Charter and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. The European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages has, however, proven much more problematic to ratify due to a failure to reach consensus on which of its provisions will be suitable in the Georgian context. The participant underlined the importance of ratifying the Charter and to deal

with the issue of how to protect minorities not entitled to national minority status according to the Framework Convention.

The government has also made progress on the planned repatriation of Meskhetians Turks, who were deported mainly from Samtskhe in 1944. The State Minister for Conflict Resolution, Georgi Khaindrava, is considered very active on this issue. The government will over the next years be implementing a regulated repatriation according to a quota system, based on the availability of funding in the state budget and by donors. However, it is still difficult to estimate how many Meskhetians will return to Georgia. It was stated that the government is determined to ensure the integration of Meskhetians into the Georgian society and that it views it as important to avoid concentration of returnees through settlements in small groups. The government has also realized and communicated that it will avoid repatriating Meskhetians to Samtskhe, as doing so would potentially increase tension in the region.

As regards integration policies, it was further pointed out that there have been some recent governmental initiatives aimed at rehabilitating the infrastructure in Samtskhe-Javakheti and constructing a railway to Turkey. Such initiatives are undertaken within the framework of the U.S.-funded Millennium Challenge Project.

### **Internal and External Actors**

The three major actors in relation to integration were defined as the government, international organizations and minorities. One participant argued that minorities constitute the weakest link in this relationship, since they are not powerful enough to have an influence over political processes. Since minority representatives are not equipped to advocate common interests, ideas emanating from minority communities are mainly perceived as secessionist claims. As a result, the government addresses extremists rather than the real problems of minority communities.

The government itself was described as interested in integrating ethnic minorities, but as lacking coherent and long-term plans in this regard. There is a lack of coordination between government bodies and other relevant institutions. The absence of both institutional capacity and leadership was termed as the primary reason for the government's weak resolve on integration issues.

More interaction and coordination of efforts are needed from these three key actors in order to formulate and implement sustainable integration policies. It was also pointed out that it would be beneficial to apply a broader perspective on integration, focusing on developing and promoting a civic national identity instead of maintaining a narrow focus on compactly settled minorities. A proper integration policy should include all parts of Georgia.

It was noted that nineteenth century national ideas based on homeland, faith and language are quite present in today's Georgia, posing an important obstacle to the development of a civic national identity. The government was described as willing to enforce civic values but the promotion of civic national identity is not yet an established priority. The government considers a wide range of other issues more urgent and is at present only rhetorically emphasizing its importance.

Furthermore, it was stated that governmental efforts are too concentrated to Tbilisi and that it is of uttermost importance to also regionally ensure an anchoring of a common state vision. Issues such as integration with Europe and NATO must be promoted nation-wide and need more room and visibility in public debate.

The discussion during the third session included problems within Georgian civil society. One participant divided NGOs into three kinds: Community NGOs (representing community interests), Advocacy NGOs (advocating interests and lobbying) and Think Tanks (providing policy recommendations and communicating these to elites). The Georgian civil society was described as problematic in several ways. Community-based organizations too often address the ideas of external actors and not the actual problems of the communities they represent. However, it was also argued that on the grass-roots level, there are always active individuals within community based organizations that will address relevant issues, regardless of access to funding, and that this is an indispensable component of these organizations. Advocacy NGOs and Think Tanks are considered weak and their dependence on external funding gives rise to certain sustainability issues. There tends also to be a certain rivalry between such organizations, as they often compete for grants offered by foreign donors.

International organizations were criticized for employing local staff members who have little understanding of minority problems. One participant voiced the opinion that the regional NGO society is developing into a new clan with monopoly on international support and that this

effectively prevents new people from taking part in political processes. International organizations should therefore try harder to diversify their support and identify minority organizations with own visions and to monitor project implementation more closely.

Another perceived problem was that minority issues are defined by elites. Over the last few years, a younger generation has emerged which may well be more capable of addressing the problems, but is actively blocked from becoming part of the process. The heads of functioning NGOs in Samtskhe-Javakheti were estimated to around 20 people, to which most development aid (in the form of training etc.) is directed. Little attention is paid to other potential actors within the civil society, especially within the younger generation.

It was stated that there is no true interest in integration among the entrenched elites, since this would deprive them of their power base and role as leaders. The government's practice of playing along with local clans in terms of training and funding does nothing to help the situation. Clans are perceived as manipulating ethnic issues in order to maintain their economic interests, and as preventing democratization and modernization in order to stay in control. While the new government has shown an interest in working with new civil society partners, many of these have been black-listed.

In the vacuum created through the lack of government leadership and motivation, civil society and international organizations were viewed as playing an important role in promoting national integration and civic values. It was stated that civil society and external actors are currently the only actors actively addressing these issues, while the government remains passive. The participants were optimistic towards the potential role of civil society, provided that its ability to act independently is strengthened and that mechanisms for increased interaction between NGOs are created. These two means of equipping civil society should be provided by international organizations.

One participant stressed that coalition building within the civil society sector is one way of preventing competition between local organizations for grants, and simultaneously of counterbalancing the current monopolies of NGOs run by old regional elites (especially in Samtskhe-Javakheti). It is, however, crucial that strong NGO coalitions are not perceived as a threat to the central government, since such initiatives could then easily be blocked.

Another suggested priority was the creation and encouragement of new elites and leaders, sharing a common state vision. An increased emphasis on new 'ownership' could break the influence of clans and allow training and influence of new actors.

The idea of promoting a new elite with positive attitudes towards national integration and an orientation towards the EU and the U.S. may however prove problematic, since many credible minority NGOs are not "euro-visioned" and are not in favor of integration. Instead, most new movements develop more ethnic nationalist positions. This was in part considered a consequence of minority representatives feeling excluded from Georgia's international policy work and thus do not view integration with the EU and NATO as a concern to them. It was therefore underlined that minorities must be included in debates and opinion-building on these issues in order to feel part of the agenda. Attitudes on the importance of autonomy were also considered an effect of the negligence on part of the government to engage in dialogue on these issues.

## **Conclusions**

The workshop concluded with suggestions on plausible ways of moving forward in addressing identified problems, and the focus and scope of the planned conference in Tbilisi, set for 29-30 June, 2006.

Since the government currently lacks capacity and interest, motivating it to assume leadership was considered a precondition for the efficiency and success of proposed activities. It was proposed that a steering committee be created in order to engage the government and provide it with ownership, as well as engage it in policy debates and policy planning. Most decisions are at present taken through personal networks and not at an institutional level, which further underlines the importance of the active involvement of the government.

It was agreed that the conference should strive to represent Georgia in a wider sense and avoid a Tbilisi-centered approach. Relevant government representatives will thus be invited, along with representatives from isolated regions. It was also considered important to engage governmental entities on the regional levels, since the involvement and motivation of officials on the local levels will be crucial to the implementation of planned activities and since it is on these levels that most contacts between government and minorities take place. Media on the national, regional and individual levels

should preferably also be involved, along with representatives from other sectors, such as local businesses.

Within the governmental sphere, suggested representatives included the Ministry of Education, the State Ministry for Conflict Resolution, the Ministry of Justice, the President's Advisor on Integration, the State Ministry for Civil Integration and the Human Rights and Civil integration Committee of the Georgian Parliament.

When discussing the agenda of the conference, it was suggested that models of society, and the role and place of minorities in these models should be the central theme, since this is considered a neglected topic in Georgian public and civil society debate. Thus, the conference was set to focus on principal issues of national and state integration, and participants were to be invited to present visions on how isolated citizens can become part of Georgia. The conference will seek to engage participants in dialogues regarding issues that proved particularly central in the field of integration, such as Language, Education and Public Participation.