

Is the EU Heading Towards Another Lost Generation?

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Georgia has historically been socially heterogeneous, multilingual, and multiethnic, having been formed by a range of groups with linguistic, religious, and national elements of diversity. The ethnic composition of modern Georgia remains very diverse. Nowadays, according to the most recent 2014 census, the main ethnic minorities in Georgia are Azerbaijanis 233,000 (6.3 per cent), Armenians 168,100 (4.5 per cent), Russians 26,000 (0.7 per cent), Ossetians 14,400 (0.4 per cent), Ukrainians 6,000 (0.2 per cent), Kists 5,700 (0.2 per cent), Greeks 5,500 (0.1 per cent) Assyrians 2,400 (0.1 per cent) as well as small Jewish and Polish communities. Minority communities are spread out across Georgia: in the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo-Kartli, there are concentrated ethnic minority settlements of ethnic Armenians and ethnic Azerbaijanis.

An essential aspect of successful nation-building is integrating Georgia's minorities into the country's political, economic and cultural life. Yet, social, political and economic exclusion remains a significant challenge to members of ethnic minorities living in Georgia today.

In accordance with "Minority Rights Group International", the roots of minority isolation in Georgia originate from the USSR. "USSR's nationalities policy emphasized ethnicity before citizenship as the ultimate badge of belonging". In Soviet Georgia, ethnic Georgians had privileged access to high-ranking positions, excluding minorities from access to high-level decision-making in Georgia over many generations, resulting in hindering their effective political participation.

Indeed, the legacy of Soviet policies left a mark. To this day, ethnic Georgians and ethnic minorities find it difficult to view themselves as united, equal members of the country. The situation worsened when in 1991, Georgia declared its independence. Georgians defined belonging to a nation in an ethnically exclusivist way, only ethnic Georgians were considered full members of the nation. That is why ethnic minorities suffered from being excluded from the state-building process, which further contributed to their marginalization. After Abkhazia and Samachablo (also nowadays called South Ossetia) declared their own independence, resulting in conflict, all ethnic minorities were portrayed as supporters of the separatist movement, thus as a threat to the integrity of the country. Up to the present moment, to a large extent, ethnic minorities are seen as temporary guests, who should act as guests, be grateful for Georgians welcoming them into their land and recognize Georgians as a 'titular nation'. At the same time, they are still perceived as a threat to the integrity of Georgian territory. This belief especially is prevalent over ethnic Armenians living in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region and over ethnic Azerbaijanis living in the Kvemo-Kartli region. While many Georgians view ethnic minorities as supporters of separatist ideology, waiting for a chance to "betray" Georgia, minorities often see Georgian assimilation as a threat to their ethnic identities. According to the research done by "The Levan Mikeladze Foundation", "Fear of assimilation, especially in the Armenian community, and a lack of support from ethnic Georgians lead these minorities to seek that support in the historical homelands of their ethnic kin".

A recent interesting study was conducted by "CRRC Georgia" which provided Important findings about the attitudes of ethnic minorities and ethnic Georgians towards a number of key issues today as well as in the recent past. Despite the unreasonable fear of Georgians about ethnic minorities being "disloyal", the findings of the survey, once more, proved these fears to be irrational. As the study shows, 67% of the participants of the survey, identified more with their citizenship than their ethnicity, 15% of the Georgian population consider both identities equally important and 16% find their ethnicity more important. The survey also explored people's perceptions of what might be described as nationalist views of citizenship. The vast majority (98%) of the participants of the survey said that they are proud to be Georgian citizens.

Interestingly, knowing the Georgian language is considered a significant attribute of Georgian citizens. As shown by the "CRRC Georgia survey", 92% think that Georgian citizens should speak

the Georgian language. 94% also thought that members of ethnic minorities who want to work in the civil service should be required to know the Georgian language. During the Soviet Union, there was no need of knowing the Georgian language as citizens could communicate with each other and with authorities in Russian. Now, not knowing the Georgian language is an extreme obstacle for ethnic minorities living in Georgia, as it is an essential attribute for effective integration. Knowing the Georgian language is a crucial aspect to access everything, from social life, higher education to state services.

According to the article “Georgia’s Minorities: Breaking Down Barriers to Integration” by “The Levan Mikeladze Foundation”, as a tool to protect themselves from the language policy of the Soviet Union, small nations prioritized language in the building of their identities. And because the Soviet Union did not recognize religion, the language acquired even greater importance. Indeed, in independent Georgia, language proficiency became the key aspect of integration. Learning the Georgian language may be one of the first steps towards integration, although, knowing the Georgian language does not guarantee it fully. Many ethnic minorities speak Georgian with an accent or sometimes make grammar mistakes, this makes them subject of mocking from ethnic Georgians. Furthermore, it is notable that the responsibility for integration is wrongly assigned to only ethnic minorities and is not equally assigned to the government of Georgia to effectively provide means to strengthen the integration process. If such social and governmental attitude continues, the integration will never be achieved. Multilingual education reform was launched by the education ministry to ensure effective teaching of Georgian language while preserving minority languages, however, numerous issues have emerged during its implementation, making it difficult for schools to adapt to new models.

Georgia is predominantly an orthodox-Christian country, the Orthodox Church is arguably the most influential institution. Although there is no existing research, on how much religion facilitates or hinders ethnic minorities' integration, It is clear, that ethnic minorities' religious identities influence the ethnic Georgian's perceptions of them. Historically, in Georgia, religion was considered as a component of the Georgian identity. This is quite unusual since the Autonomous Republic of Adjara is home to a large ethnic Georgian Muslim community. Unfortunately, even ethnic Georgians who are Muslim, are repeatedly required to prove their loyalty to the Georgian nation. Religion should not play a role in the Georgian national identity and consciousness and should not be considered as a component of Georgian citizenship. Religious differences are insignificant. So thought Ilia Chavchavadze, the father of Georgia's nationalist movement. According to Ilia Chavchavadze, “Neither the unity of language nor the unity of faith or ethnicity can bind people together more than the unity of history”. Indeed, Muslims, Christians, Representatives of any other beliefs should all be seen as equal members of Georgia.

It is time to break the cycle and stop dividing citizens of Georgia into “we” and “others” groups once and for all. Although Georgia has made notable progress in the integration of ethnic minorities while protecting their cultural heritage, more needs to be done to ensure the effective implementation of such reforms. Ethnic minorities are equal and full members of Georgia and more attention from the government is needed to achieve higher public and political involvement

on ethnic minorities. Furthermore, it is time for ethnic Georgians to see all fellow citizens without any preconceived notions and facilitate in creating a united society. After all, integrated and tolerant citizens are the guarantee of a prosperous country.