

## Query response

### **Georgia: The situation of ethnic minorities**

- What is the situation of ethnic minorities in Georgia?
- Are ethnic minorities discriminated against in terms of health care?
- What is the situation for ethnic Abkhazians in Georgia outside of Abkhazia?

#### **Background**

According to a November 2014 census in Georgia, ethnic minorities make up 13.2% of the Georgian population.<sup>1</sup> Azeris<sup>2</sup> and Armenians are the two largest minority groups. Azeris account for 6.3% of the total population and constitute a significant group in the region of Kvemo Kartli which borders Armenia and Azerbaijan to the south. The Armenian minority accounts for 4.5% of the total population and is a significant group in the region Samtskhe Javakheti bordering Turkey and Armenia in the south. Other smaller ethnic groups include Russians, Ossetians, Yezidis, Ukrainians, Chechens, Greeks and Assyrians (Geostat 2016, p. 8; Muiznieks 2014, p. 23). Furthermore, Georgia has small populations of ethnic Roma and Meskhetians.<sup>3</sup> The information about ethnic minorities in this response relates mainly to the two major ethnic minority groups in Georgia, Armenians and Azeris.

Georgia has ratified the main international human rights conventions such as the European Convention on Human Rights and various UN conventions.<sup>4</sup> As a member of the European

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<sup>1</sup> According to the 2014 census, the Georgian population amounted to 3,713,804 persons, which is a 15% decrease since the previous census in 2002 (4,371,535 persons) (Geostat 2016, p. 2).

<sup>2</sup> The Azeris are a Turkish people.

<sup>3</sup> Until 1944 the Meskhetians stayed in Meskheti and Javakhaeti along the Georgian-Turkish border. They have long been classified as Turks. Stalin deported the Meskhetians to Central Asia in 1944. In 1968 they were rehabilitated, but were not allowed to return to Georgia. In July 2007, the Georgian parliament passed legislation on repatriation of deported populations, including the Meskhetians. Today there are three small communities of Meskhetians in Georgia, two in the west of Georgia and one in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region. The Meskhetians are Sunni Muslims (Ferrari 2014, p. 17; Minority Rights Group n.d.b).

<sup>4</sup> The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Garces de los Fayos 2014, p. 19).

Partnership<sup>5</sup> and a party to the ENP (European Neighbourhood Policy) Action Plan, the Georgian parliament passed an anti-discrimination law in May 2014. The Georgian Constitution contains provisions on equal treatment and non-discrimination of minority groups. The Constitution also guarantees freedom of expression as well as freedom of belief and religion. Article 38 of the Constitution establishes the right of all Georgian citizens to develop freely their own culture and to use their native language both privately and in the public sphere (Garces de los Fayos 2014, p. 19).

In 2005 the Council for Ethnic Minorities was established. The Council comprises most minority organisations within the Georgian territory. The Council is intended to ensure that the minorities and governmental structures maintain a dialogue on cooperation and consultation; including the monitoring of an action plan for tolerance and civil integration. This work was initiated by the State Ministry's Office of Reconciliation and Civic Equality, which was formed in 2008. The action plan is intended to implement measures within the following areas: rule of law, education, the Georgian language, access to media and other information, political integration and civic engagement, social and regional integration and culture and identity (Ferrari 2014, p. 16).

## **The situation of ethnic minorities**

### **Abuse and discrimination**

Sources Landinfo interviewed on a fact-finding mission to Georgia in November 2016 (Public Defender<sup>6</sup>, Multinational Georgia<sup>7</sup>, Transparency International) were of the opinion that by and large there is no clear and direct discrimination of ethnic minorities in Georgia. According to Transparency International, violence or assault against minorities is not widespread either.

In a report published by Minority Rights Group International in 2014, it is stated that the Roma ethnic group experiences severe marginalisation and discrimination, leading to unemployment, poverty and poor access to education, health care and social benefits (Ferrari 2014, p. 17). The latter is because many do not have valid Georgian ID documents. The Roma population is one of the most vulnerable minority groups in Georgia (Svanidze 2015).

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<sup>5</sup> A cooperation between the EU and six former Soviet states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

<sup>6</sup> In 1992, the Committee on Human Rights and Interethnic Relations in the Georgian Republic was established. This was the predecessor to what later became the Office of the Public Defender of Georgia. The authority of the Public Defender today is, however, broader than that of the Committee (Public Defender of Georgia n.d.). The Public Defender for human rights monitors compliance with human rights in Georgia and jurisdiction related to it. The Office advises the government on what steps should be taken to comply with human rights, but the advice is not binding for the authorities. The Public Defender also analyses the country's laws and policies, to see whether the practices are in line with international standards and provide relevant recommendations (Public Defender of Georgia n.d.). Based on a meeting with the Public Defender's Office in November 2016, as well as other sources' description of the institution and the institutions own publications, it is Landinfo's impression that the Public Defender's Office fulfils its role in an independent manner.

<sup>7</sup> Multinational Georgia is an umbrella organisation (NGO) that provides support and cooperates with representatives of the diaspora and NGOs working to protect the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities in Georgia (Multinational Georgia n.d.). The organisation's work covers areas such as education, conflict prevention and legal assistance. It monitors elections in regions inhabited by minorities and has offices in different regions of the country (Multinational Georgia, meeting in Tbilisi November 2016).

## Representation in society and politics

Both written and oral sources maintain that ethnic minorities have limited participation in the various parts of Georgian society. According to a 2013 report by the Public Defender of Georgia (as quoted in Muiznieks 2014, p. 25), the participation of ethnic minorities in political, cultural and public life remains problematic. There are few representatives of ethnic minorities in the government, political parties and civil society. Minority Rights Group International (n.d.a) have also pointed out that this is a problem. The Georgian non-governmental organisation Public Movement "Multinational Georgia" (meeting in Tbilisi, November 2016) similarly argued that minorities are poorly represented in political life. And although all ethnic groups have equal rights under the constitution, it is a problem that ethnic minorities are not adequately represented in Georgian society.

Since the parliamentary elections in 2016, there are three Armenian and four Azeri representatives in the Georgian parliament (out of 150 representatives) (Tert.am 2016). Very few government officials at higher levels are of minority origin, particularly at the national level. The two minority-dominated regions of Kvemo Kartli and Javakheti Samtskhe had as of 2014 never had an ethnic Armenian or Azeri governor. Minorities tend to be better represented in local councils at town and village level (Garces de los Fayos 2014, p. 20).

## Language, schools and access to information

Many members of ethnic minorities in the regions of Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe Javakheti, i.e. Azeris and Armenians, are not proficient in the Georgian language. This contributes to their being isolated and prevents their integration and effective participation in Georgian society (Muiznieks 2014, p. 23).

There are minority schools where teaching is conducted in the students' native language. According to the Law on General Education, art. 4 (as cited in Georgian Education Authorities 2014, p. 4), Georgian citizens who are not Georgian native speakers may receive general education in their mother tongue. According to the national curriculum, learning a native language (Armenian, Azeri or Russian) is compulsory in minority schools. It is also compulsory to learn Georgian.<sup>8</sup>

In minority schools, Georgian is taught as a second language several hours a week. The rest of the curriculum is taught in languages used by ethnic minorities. Interlocutors that the human rights commissioner in the Council of Europe, Nils Muiznieks, met on a trip to Georgia in 2014, highlighted the need to improve the quality of Georgian language teaching as a second language. It was pointed out that the teacher training for instruction of Georgian as a second language, is not good enough. It was also pointed out that minority students are not always given access to textbooks teaching Georgian as a second language. The number of Georgian teachers sent to the regions has increased. The same applies to the number of hours allocated to teaching Georgian (Muiznieks 2014, p. 24). Representatives of the non-governmental organisation Multinational Georgia confirmed to Landinfo that the quality of the teaching of Georgian as a second language is still not good enough. Representatives of the NGO added that

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<sup>8</sup> Since 2010, measures have been put in motion to ensure that students from minority backgrounds can get a full higher education. There are scholarships for individuals with an Azeri and Armenian background: they must pass a proficiency test in their native language, and based on the results the students are enrolled in preparatory programs. They must also undergo a one-year language course in Georgian (Georgian education authorities 2014, p. 6).

there is no incentive for ethnic minorities to learn Georgian because many members of minorities do not identify with the Georgian republic (meeting November 2016). It has also been pointed out that there is a shortage of textbooks and of sufficiently qualified teachers in native language education (Muiznieks 2014, p. 24).

Another topic that was raised by the human rights commissioner of the Council of Europe on his visit to Georgia in 2014, was that there is insufficient access to the Georgian media and the information landscape in general in regions densely populated by ethnic minorities (Muiznieks 2014, p. 27). The Public Defender (as quoted in Muiznieks 2014, p. 27) has pointed out that daily news broadcasts in minority languages transmitted by the public Georgian broadcaster GPC (Georgian Public Broadcaster) do not provide comprehensive information for minorities. As little information from the Georgian media is available in languages understood by minorities, the ethnic minorities are not always given local perspectives on issues or sufficient information about the situation in Georgia. They get most of their information from the Armenian, Azerbaijani, Russian or Turkish media.

#### State protection against abuse of ethnic minorities

According to the Public Defender (meeting November 2016), the prosecutors handle criminal cases involving abuse against ethnic minorities in the same way they handle criminal cases of abuse against religious minorities. What characterizes the prosecution's treatment of ethnic and religious minorities is an inadequate use of hate crime charges against perpetrators.

#### Domestic violence

Domestic violence occurs among various ethnic minorities in Georgia, but particularly Azeri women are at risk of being exposed to domestic violence. Azeri women are often seen as the most vulnerable group in the community because they are facing a double burden: they belong both to a vulnerable social group and to an ethnic and religious (Muslim) minority. In a Reproductive Health Survey from 2010, carried out by the Georgian Centre for Disease Control and Public Health, in cooperation with the Georgian Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs, it emerged that Azeri women are almost twice as likely as Georgian women to experience violence within their marriages. Verbal and physical violence from a partner is particularly widespread: nearly a third of the women reported verbal abuse during their lifetime, and 9 percent reported that their spouse or partner had inflicted physical harm on them. The figures estimated by the survey must be read with the proviso that they only cover a part of the cases of violence. The figures only include cases that are reported to the police, and there is widespread underreporting of incidents of domestic violence to the police. One of the most frequent explanations for the problem of domestic violence in Georgia is the economic hardship caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Men were particularly affected by unemployment and deprived of their traditional role in the family, often combined with alcohol abuse. For their part, Azeri women are subject both to the Caucasian mentality that the man is head of the family, and Muslim traditions and beliefs (Peinhopf 2014, pp. 5-7).

#### Early marriage

Persons under the age of 18 can marry if they are at least 16 years old and have parental consent. When it comes to early marriage, Azeri women have the highest representation. Gender experts

and female NGO leaders argue that early marriage is the biggest obstacle to Azeri women's participation in social, political and economic life, and one of the reasons for the high incidence of domestic violence (Peinhopf 2014, p. 8).

In the region of Kvemo Kartli (mainly populated by Azeris), 130 minor girls (58 16-year-olds and 72 17-year-olds) were married in 2011, compared to only two boys (both 17-year-olds). While the situation for men in the region does not deviate from the nationwide picture, the women here are significantly more likely to marry at a relatively young age. A quarter of all marriages among minor women took place in this region (Peinhopf 2014, p. 9).

### **Ethnic minorities' access to health care**

Both the Public Defender and the NGO Multinational Georgia (meetings in Tbilisi, November 2016) believed that ethnic minorities have the same access to healthcare as other Georgian citizens. This also applies to ethnic Abkhazians in Georgia outside of Abkhazia. There may be language barriers, however, making it a challenge for patients who do not speak Georgian at all, or not well enough, to understand information from doctors who only speak Georgian. There is also a shortage of written health information in the minorities' mother tongue. Multinational Georgia argued that this could amount to implicit discrimination.

### **The situation for ethnic Abkhazians outside Abkhazia**

Abkhazia declared independence from Georgia after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which encountered resistance from the Georgian side. After fierce fighting in 1993, the Georgian government forces had to withdraw. Russian forces were deployed on the border between Abkhazia and Georgia, and a large part of the population fled, mainly Georgians. Today Abkhazia is in practice independent under Russian protection (Thordarson 2015). Georgia and most other countries in the world, with some exceptions, including Russia, consider Abkhazia to still be a part of Georgia.

There are not many ethnic Abkhazians in Georgia outside of Abkhazia. According to the census from 2002<sup>9</sup> it is probably around 3,500 persons (Minority Rights Group International n.d.a). According to Multinational Georgia (meeting in Tbilisi, November 2016), some Abkhazians live in the region of Adjara. They are fully integrated, speak Georgian fluently and have lived there a long time. In addition there are Abkhazians who fled Abkhazia and who now live in Tbilisi (IDPs).

There are not many reports that specifically describe the situation of ethnic Abkhazians in Georgia outside of Abkhazia. One exception is the French country of origin information unit OFPRA, which in a 2014 report about the situation of ethnic Abkhazians in Georgia reported that there have been no recorded cases of abuse or other serious incidents<sup>10</sup> against Abkhazians in recent years (OFPRA 2014, p. 4). Beyond this, OFPRA, having consulted sources (Muiznieks 2014, p. 32; Ferrari 2014, p. 16-17), mentions that roughly the same challenges as other ethnic minorities face also apply to the Abkhazians: marginalisation by poverty, limited

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<sup>9</sup> Landinfo does not have a figure for ethnic Abkhazians in Georgia outside of Abkhazia from the last census from 2014.

<sup>10</sup> OFPRA uses the term *persécution* = persecution.

participation in politics, insufficient focus on minority languages in the media and in school/education. OFPRA notes that, although the integration of Abkhazians in Georgia has not yet been successful, it seems that this minority group is experiencing an increasingly tolerant environment. Landinfo asked several sources in Georgia in November 2016 (the Public Defender, Multinational Georgia, Transparency International) about the situation of ethnic Abkhazians in Georgia outside of Abkhazia, and none of them had knowledge of abuse or significant discrimination against this group.

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Country of origin information presented in Landinfo's Query responses does not contain policy recommendations nor does it reflect official Norwegian views.

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