

## NATIONAL SECURITY PROBLEMS RELATED TO ETHNO-RELIGIOUS GROUPS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS (GEORGIAN CASE)

<sup>1</sup>Kakha Putkaradze, <sup>2</sup>Ioseb Japaridze, <sup>3</sup>Tamaz Putkaradze

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### Abstract

Georgia is a polyethnic country. Armenians, Azeris, Russians, Greeks, Kurds, Kists, Dagestanis and other ethnic-confessional groups live next to Georgians. Thus, the traditions of inter-ethnic relations have a long history in Georgia.

Multiethnicity is one of the most important factors in the democratic development of a society, but in certain geopolitical conditions it can also be dangerous. For centuries, the invaders pursued anti-Georgian demographic policies in Georgia, compactly displacing members of other ethnic groups to the border areas of states inhabited by the same ethnic group, and deliberately creating micro-islands of ethnic minorities. It is in these two micro-islands that conflict has already erupted, while the other two regions carry the risk of the conflict.

Identifying the risks facing the state, justifying the need for preventive measures, and integrating ethno-religious minorities into the common state is the main task of our research.

The methodological basis of the research is the universal scientific principles of objectivity, comprehensiveness and systematics, historical-comparative and historical-typological methods.

The factual materials presented in the article make clear the factors hindering the general state integration, the problems related to the functioning of the state language, the different foreign policy orientations of the ethnic groups.

The article highlights the qualitative issues of integration of ethnic minorities in Georgia, strengthening the teaching of the state language, protection of cultural values of ethno-religious minorities, raising the degree of their involvement in public, political and cultural life.

**Keywords:** Georgia, conflict, prevention, integration, ethnic Minorities, hybrid war, threat, religion, tolerance

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<sup>1</sup> PhD in Social Sciences Associate Professor LEPL - David Agmashenebeli National Defence Academy of Georgia

<sup>2</sup> PhD in Social Sciences Head of the MA Programs LEPL - David Agmashenebeli National Defence Academy of Georgia

<sup>3</sup> PhD in History, Associate Professor Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University

## INTRODUCTION

Georgia is a polyethnic country. Armenians, Azeris, Russians, Greeks, Kurds, Kists, Dagestanis and other ethnic-confessional groups live next to Georgians. Thus, the traditions of inter-ethnic relations have a long history in Georgia.

The pursuit of mono-ethnicity is a prerequisite for the emergence of extreme forms of ultranationalist sentiments, multiethnicity is one of the important factors in the democratic development of society. Over the centuries, with the participation of various ethnic groups living in Georgia, a common national culture acceptable to all was created (Sayatnova, S. Parajanov, Hovhannes Tumanyan ...), the best traditions of inter-ethnic relations, and tolerance were established. This cultural diversity gives Georgia a special charm, although in certain geopolitical conditions it can also be threatening. In this case, take into account the low level of economic development (such conflicts occur mainly in weak countries), where for centuries the invaders pursued anti-Georgian demographic policies, for the purpose of colonization, settling members of other ethnic groups to the border areas of states inhabited by the same ethnic group, namely: in Javakheti by Paskevich in 1828-1832. The settled Armenians border the state of Armenia, in Kvemo Kartli the Azerbaijanis - Azerbaijan, in Kakheti the Leks - Dagestan, the Kists in the Pankisi Gorge - Chechnya, in Shida Kartli the Ossetians - in the north. Ossetia, etc. On the principle of “divide and rule”, ethnic minority micro-islands have been deliberately created in Georgia, in two of the region conflict has already erupted, while the other regions carry the risk of the conflict.

Reasoning and implications: The state, including the dominant nation, has a special responsibility towards ethnic and religious minorities. The country should promote their development, bring together all ethnic groups and integrate into the nation-state because of civic awareness. At the same time preventive measures should be taken to avoid possible dangers.

To better understand the problem, we consider it necessary to present the ethnic composition of the Georgian population in a quantitative context. According to the 2014 census, there were 3,713,804 citizens living in Georgia, of which 13.2% of the population belong to ethnic minorities. The largest ethnic minority group - 6.3 percent - is made up of Azerbaijanis, 4.5 percent - Armenians, and the remaining 2.54 percent - Russians, Ossetians, Kurds, Kists and other ethnic groups<sup>4</sup>.

The compact settlement of ethnic minorities, along with many other factors, is a significant impediment to integration with the rest of the population of the country, which is also facilitated by problems with the functioning of the state language throughout the country. According to 2002 data, only 30% of the non-Georgian-speaking population spoke the state language<sup>5</sup>. Added to this there are the different political orientations of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The multi-vector political

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<sup>4</sup> National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2014: 9

<sup>5</sup> Decree of the Government of Georgia №1740, State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration and 2015-2020, 2015 and State Department of Statistics of Georgia, 2002:118-123 3 Khutsishvili, Q., 2002:9.

orientation of the political units of the Caucasus creates a different picture of their political interests. Georgia aspires to the West, Armenia remains Russia's reliable partner in the Caucasus. The political orientation of Azerbaijan is also different. The picture is similar from a religious point of view<sup>3</sup>. All this may affect the attitudes of ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis, citizens of Georgia.

In the process of building a democratic state, it is important for ethnic minorities to participate in the civic and political life, to integrate into society and to preserve their cultural, traditional, and everyday elements. It is necessary to analyze the role and place of ethnic minorities in the state-building process. Emphasis should be placed on strengthening the state language proficiency, protecting the rights of ethnic minorities, their integration problems with the rest of the Georgian population, strengthening their involvement in civic and political life, and encouraging and increasing access to economic, social, and educational projects, providing objective information about the processes in the country and the region through the media. The named factors were fairly described in the State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration (2015-2020). The document raised the issue of the need to implement the following strategic goals:

- Equal and full participation of ethnic minorities in civil and political life;
- Creating equal socio-economic conditions and opportunities for members of ethnic minorities;
- Access to quality education for ethnic minorities at all levels, improving the quality of state language knowledge;
- “Preserving the culture of ethnic minorities, encouraging a tolerant environment”<sup>6</sup>.

To solve the problems related to ethnic minorities, important decisions have been made by the state at different levels of the executive power in different periods. Back in 2005, the Office of the State Minister for Civic Integration was established in the Government of Georgia. Zinaida Bestaeva, a Georgian citizen of Ossetian nationality, was appointed State Minister. Following the abolition of the agency, in 2008 the Office of the State Minister for Reintegration was established, which developed the “National Concept of Tolerance and Civic Integration”<sup>7</sup>. In 2012, the agency changed its name to the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality.

The separation of state policies related to ethnic and religious minorities should also be considered a positive step. The Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality charge of coordinating activities with ethnic minorities and the State Agency for Religion is responsible for Religious Affairs, established in 2014. It was also tasked with managing and coordinating the state's religious policy<sup>8</sup>. The integration of ethnic minorities and their participation in socio-political processes was aimed at initiating ethnic minority internships in the public sector. In order to access the education system, ethnic minorities were allowed to take general skills tests in their mother language, after which

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<sup>6</sup> Decree of the Government of Georgia №1740, 2015

<sup>7</sup> Open Society Foundation, 2019: 13/17

<sup>8</sup> E. Marikashvili, M. Gigineishvili, 2017: 6/7

they completed a one-year Georgian language course and continued their studies in relevant specialties in Georgian higher education institutions<sup>9</sup>. To strengthen the work on the issues of ethnic minorities, an advisory service was established under the Public Defender, whose main function was to establish communication between the state and ethnic minorities, to discuss issues related to ethnic minorities and to develop appropriate recommendations<sup>10</sup>.

Despite the positive steps taken by the state, the following key problems facing ethnic communities have been identified:

1. Relations of ethnic minorities with administrative bodies;
2. Delays in the integration of ethnic minorities into society due to language barriers;
3. Involvement of ethnic minorities in the electoral, civil, and political process<sup>11</sup>;
4. “Problems related to economic and social issues”<sup>12</sup>;
5. Low level of civic education”<sup>13</sup>;
6. Frequency and popularity of usability of foreign media<sup>14</sup>;
7. Opportunity for limited access to information disseminated by Georgian media<sup>15</sup>;
8. Problems related to their integration in the Georgian-speaking population. In the context of this problem, the Munich Security Research Center discusses issues related to Georgian identity. Part of Georgian identity discusses religion (Orthodox Christianity) and ethnicity (Georgian)<sup>16</sup>;
9. Skepticism of ethnic minorities regarding European integration”<sup>15</sup>.

The problems faced by ethnic minorities are not new to the state. Over the years, the involvement of ethnic minorities in political processes has not been fully realized or has been unsystematic. The involvement of ethnic minorities at both the legislative and political levels, as well as local self-government, is also a significant challenge. Despite local self-government reform and the adoption of Georgia’s organic law, strengthening the involvement of ethnic minorities in municipal decision-making remains a challenge. Deficiencies in the education system, which do not fully address the systemic problems of state and mother language knowledge among ethnic minorities also remain challenge. Access to general and higher education in the state language remains relevant. Ethnic minorities were allowed to take general national examinations in their mother language, although further improvement was needed to improve the one-year state language training program, which

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<sup>9</sup> CRRC, Council of Europe, 2018

<sup>10</sup> A. Adamia, K. Kiknavelidze, G. Lashkhi, 2017

<sup>11</sup> A. Ullmann, Ed. M. Bieri 2016

<sup>12</sup> N. Samkharadze, 2020

<sup>13</sup> Georgian National Security Concept, 2011:29/7

<sup>14</sup> National Security Policy Planning and Coordination Rule

<sup>15</sup> Report of the State Security Service of Georgia 01.01.2017-31.12.2017

<sup>16</sup> Report of the State Security Service of Georgia 01.01.2018-31.12.2018

<sup>15</sup> Hoffman, F. 2009:52

failed to fully address issues related to state language learning in ethnic minorities. All the above affects the quality of study as well. Access to health, social, education or economic services is also related to issues related to the knowledge of the state language.

The official working language in state institutions is Georgian. Strengthening state language literacy programs will facilitate ethnic minorities' access to state and municipal services. It will be an important contributing factor to accelerate their integration with the Georgian population.

Citizens of Georgia's low level of state language proficiency in ethnic minorities and the popularity of the use of foreign media may be perceived by external forces as a contributing factor to the use of soft power, the likely purpose of which may be:

- Violation of the constitutional order of the country;
- Attempt to change the Euro-Atlantic course of Georgia and incite nihilistic views of the population towards European integration;
- Discrediting the government and the political spectrum;
- polarization of society;
- Expanding political and economic influence.

The following actions are likely to be taken by stakeholders to achieve the named tasks:

- an attempt to incite ethnic strife;
- providing targeted misinformation from foreign media;
- Possibility to use the political spectrum;
- Trying to gain influence in the economic and energy spheres;
- Opportunity to offer education and economic projects to non-Georgian speaking population.

Article 17 of the Georgian National Security Concept aims to strengthen multiculturalism, integrate ethnic minorities, and increase their involvement in public and political life. It focuses on the need for ethnic minorities to be involved in civic and political life, the need to know Georgian as the state language, and the preservation of ethnic minority culture and identity. Article 11 raises issues related to civic integration. According to the document, all citizens of Georgia should have an equal opportunity to participate in the political, economic, cultural, social life of the country and to participate in achieving and strengthening national unity and consent<sup>17</sup>. The issues of civic integration, involvement of ethnic minorities in public and political life, protection of cultural values of ethnic minorities are also addressed in the rules of national security policy planning and coordination. The document considers the civic integration of national and religious minorities living in the country as one of the important priorities of the state. The same document pays special attention to cyber security, civic awareness, establishment, FC VBN, and development of the relevant educational base<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Miklaucic, 2015

<sup>18</sup> Report of the State Security Service of Georgia 01.01.2019-31.12.2019

The existence of future hybrid threats from hostile states to Georgia is not hidden from anyone. The SSU reports emphasize that the target of hybrid operations of foreign special services is the population of Georgia, including ethnic or religious minorities in the country. These threats include:

- Stirring up anti-Western sentiments in Georgian society; Tarnishing Georgia's image as a reliable partner at the international level; The emergence of mistrust, uncertainty, hopelessness, and nihilism in society;
- Creating centers of destabilization on ethnic and religious grounds to develop disintegration processes in the country and to polarize Georgian society;
- Use of propaganda media and disinformation components, cyber-operations and individual cyber-attacks, destructive political groups, and public-populist associations<sup>19</sup>.

SSU reports focus on the possibilities of hybrid wars against Georgia. Hybrid so-called Fourth generation war is a combination of complex methods (conventional capabilities, asymmetric tactics, formations, terrorist acts, violence, coercion, blackmail, crime, chaos), which can be carried out by both state and non-state actors, separate groups. Their main goal is to influence the final outcome of the conflict, including in the physical and psychological dimension<sup>20</sup>. Both conventional and unconventional methods are used in hybrid operations to ensure the achievement of military-political goals<sup>21</sup>. Hybrid warfare also involves a combination of coercive and sabotage actions carried out by state / non-state actors to achieve the desired goal<sup>22</sup>.

The Georgian SUS 2019 report directly addresses the problems of hybrid actions taken against Georgia by the Russian Federation and other states, namely: 1. Occupation forces and de facto regimes; 2. Information war; 3. Soft power; 4. Economic leverage; 5. Covert operations<sup>23</sup>.

It is no secret that hostile states use disinformation methods to try to provide the population with unobjective and biased information. By manipulating public opinion, under the guise of cultural, educational, economic projects, to inspire confrontation between ethnic and religious groups, incite anti-Georgian sentiments, and distance oneself from the state. The incident related to Davit Garej is also discussed in the mentioned context. Individuals / organizations using soft power and the media to try to damage Georgian-Azerbaijani relations, to portray Azerbaijan as an occupier state, to facilitate distance of ethnic Georgians and ethnic Azeris Georgian citizens.

Georgia also came under hybrid threat during the Second Karabakh War. The possibility of Georgia's artificial involvement in the conflict has been identified. To prevent possible damaging actions against Georgia, the authorities have the following tasks on their agenda:

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<sup>19</sup> Galiskan, 25/2019, Gunneriusson, 2021

<sup>20</sup> Chivvis, 2017

<sup>21</sup> Nilsson, 2018

<sup>22</sup> White, Overdeer, 2020:355/359

<sup>23</sup> Report of the State Security Service of Georgia, 2019:24/29.

- Preventing the possible involvement of ethnic Azerbaijani and ethnic Armenian citizens in the conflict; • Prevention of attempts to artificially confront Georgian ethnic Azerbaijani and Armenian citizens;
- Strengthening border sectors;
- Strengthen communication with neighbouring states;
- Prevention of artificial tension between Georgian-Azerbaijani, Georgian-Armenian, and Azerbaijani-Armenian citizens;
- Identifying and preventing the stirring up of radical views among Georgian citizens on ethnic and religious grounds and the presentation of everyday issues on ethnic or religious grounds. Measures to prevent threats related to these issues are discussed in the 2020 report of the SSU.

The Russian hybrid war against Georgia has been going on for years. It is one of the components of Russia's aggressive policy against Georgia and its strategy, which is reflected in its strategic-political doctrines.

The hybrid war waged by Russia against Georgia is fully in line with the approaches proposed by Mark Galeot, a well-known scientist on the Russian hybrid war, namely:

- Non-kinetic operations, production of information wars;
- Deepening and establishing contacts with non-state actors;
- Existence of a command structure that directs the conduct of political and military operations<sup>24</sup>.

The hybrid war waged by Russia is nothing more than an attempt to gain influence and control over the media in Georgia in order to shape the relevant public mood, manipulate the public and influence the decisions of the state.

Hybrid scenarios are part of a unified Russian strategy that focuses on Georgia's economic, psychological, moral, political, and technological processes. Accordingly, Russian hybrid actions in Georgia are expressed in military, economic, diplomatic, intelligence, intelligence aspects. Its goal is to create an image of an enemy in the form of Georgia, to worsen the country's institutions and socio-economic background by exporting crime, corruption. All this is a tried and tested method of disrupting and forcibly changing the constitutional order of the country. The target group (Georgian population) is sorted by economic, social, ethnic, religious, political, and angular factors.

One of the targets of the Russian information war is ethnic and religious minorities living in Georgia. The degree of popularity of television and news sources of Russia and other countries among ethnic minorities is largely due to the low level of knowledge of the state language. Consequently, one of the main tasks of Russia's information operations is to create a negative attitude towards the Euro-Atlantic course among ethnic minorities and Georgian society in general. It also aims to highlight the weaknesses and inefficiencies of the country's government and institutions, and to inspire ethnic and religious strife.

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<sup>24</sup> White, Overdeer, 2020:355/359

By appealing to moral norms based on traditional values, they try to form a negative or nihilistic attitude towards anti-Western and Euro-Atlantic structures.

The Russian hybrid war has three main characteristics:

- Saving forces and using them rationally, considering the available resources; • Continuity and systematization of hybrid actions;
- Constant focus on the target group / population.

Given these characteristics, the following main tasks of the Russian hybrid war are:

- Changing the political course of Georgia, bringing Russian-oriented groups to power, and trying to return the country to the Russian vector;
- If appropriate, occupy the territory of the country without the use of a direct, clearly defined military component;
- Dissemination of narratives and implementation of actions that further legitimize military operations (distribution of Russian passports in the occupied territories, presentation of Georgia as an aggressor state after the August war, etc.);
- Using of the hybrid methods to influence on country policies and decision-making processes. Russia is actively using the following hybrid methods in Georgia to accomplish these tasks: A) information operations; B) cyber-space operations; C) proxy forces; D) economic impact; E) political influence; F) secret operations; G) diplomatic channels; H) military operations.

The following actions are especially noteworthy from the named activities:

1. Creeping occupation. It is a constant leverage of influence on the Georgian government. Its purpose is to show that the threat posed by Russia is real, and if it is expedient, it can fully occupy Georgia. With this action, Russia is trying to show its strength and the inability of the Georgian government to protect the state from creeping occupation, from the kidnappings of its own citizens. The purpose of this action is to be constantly blackmailed in order to discredit the government and to have an influence on the decision-making process. The named action is a clear example of how the military component of a hybrid operation responds and is transformed to political needs.
2. Create proxy forces. It is reflected in the support of pro-Russian forces in Georgia, including in the political and economic spheres, and in the creation and financing of pro-Russian non-governmental and media outlets;
3. Covert operations, psychological operations, operations produced in cyberspace. These actions include terrorist acts against Georgia, including the deployment and organization of intelligence activities in the region, cyber-attacks on Georgia's critical infrastructure, the dismantling of critical infrastructure, and the extraction of information.
4. Information operations. Information provided by Russian and satellite TV / mass media is intended to disseminate to the international community, on the one hand, the views of Georgia as a corrupt country, an unreliable partner, and, on the other hand, to disseminate information to Georgian society that contributes to polarization, ethnic and religious hatred. Such actions detrimental to national security could be the information campaign around the Davit-Gareji monastery complex, the blockade of the Kartsakhi border post during the Second Karabakh War, attempts to hold ethnic rallies in Tbilisi, to dismantle strategic cables, the events in Dmanisi, attempts to portray strategic partners, including Turkey and Azerbaijan, as unreliable allies, and other actions.



Conducting information warfare is one of the most prominent components of hybrid warfare to incite ethnic strife in a democratic society. This is due to the following circumstances:

- In a society based on democratic development and pluralism, everyone is equal before the law, regardless of the dominance of the ethnic group. It is possible for the government to justify its actions towards ethnic / religious minorities, However, manipulation of public opinion (as we have seen many times in the recent history of Georgia) is not ruled out among some Georgian citizens in order to dominate the view of discriminatory treatment of ethnic / religious minorities.
- Through intelligence and covert operations to incite ethnic and religious strife, narratives that seem unacceptable to the dominant nation because of the ethnic and religious affiliation.

## CONCLUSION

the ethnic and religious diversity of Georgia as an expression of poly-culturalism is one of the contributing factors to the democratic development of the country, although it also carries certain risks in a specific geopolitical context. To avoid and prevent the above-mentioned threats, it is important to qualitatively increase the process of integration of ethnic minorities in Georgia, strengthen the teaching of the state language, protect the cultural values of ethnic minorities, improve the degree of their involvement in public and political life.

Russia's hybrid operations will be further expanded and refined in the future in parallel with Georgia's gradual integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. Accordingly, the agenda includes the development of countermeasures for the threats posed by the hybrid war, as well as the timely prevention of possible conflicts on religious and ethnic grounds.

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