

# Political Participation of Armenian minority in Georgia

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## Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to analyze political participation of Armenian minority in Georgia, find out the obstacles that government of Georgia and minorities face. To analyze and compare the international legal base in the field of political integration of minorities as a key to solution for issue existed in Georgia.

## Introduction

Armenians were the largest ethnic minority in Georgia prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union (8% of the entire population, numbering at about 400.000 people); since that time they have declined in both absolute and proportional terms to become Georgia's second largest minority. According to the 2002 national census, there were 248,929 Armenians, which is 5.7% of the population of Georgia<sup>1</sup>. There is a substantial Armenian community in Tbilisi, and rural Armenian communities are compactly settled in the southern region of Samtskhe-Javakheti bordering on Armenia. There is also a considerable Armenian community in Abkhazia.

Armenians as a minority group<sup>2</sup> and other minorities are not participated in the political life of the country. In comparison of the number of Armenian population Georgian citizens of Armenian origin (with Armenian families), are poorly or not properly represented in state administrative and political bodies or agencies.

Many international watchdog organizations and institutions noted that poor knowledge of the Georgian language continues to be the main barrier to their integration and a reason for their marginalization and limited representation in political life. This explanation is applicable to the minorities living compactly in the Javakheti region. On the contrary to this fact Armenians living in the big cities for example in capital Tbilisi is fluent in Georgian but still their participation level are too low and insignificant.

Integration of ethnic minorities is one of the most important challenges for Georgian state. It is impossible to integrate minorities into state building without participation in political life. Thus the key issue that should be resolved for the successful integration process is to promote or carry out such policy that would appropriately involve minorities in political life of country.

## Overview of the Armenian minority's representation in local *Sakrebulo*s and central Parliament

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<sup>1</sup> The Georgian Statistical Service ([http://www.statistics.ge/\\_files/english/census/2002/Ethnic%20groups.pdf](http://www.statistics.ge/_files/english/census/2002/Ethnic%20groups.pdf))

<sup>2</sup> The word group in this case means collectively, or participation of the ethnic groups as a legal entity through the political party etc.

When we speak about minorities in Georgia we must take into consideration that they are residing both compactly and disseminated. In this chapter we will bring example from the municipalities where Armenian minority consist more than 5%<sup>3</sup>.

**Compactly:** There are 4 regions where ethnic Armenians are regions concentrated and in some even compose majority within the boundaries of the certain districts and municipalities. These municipalities are Akhalkalaki, Ninotsminda, Akhaltsikhe, Tsalka.

*Population of Armenian populated municipalities according to last two official censuses 1989 & 2002:*

Municipality	Armenians		Representation of Armenians in Sakrebulo as of 2014	
	Census 2002 Total/Percentage		Arm-Other	
Akhalkalaki	57516	94.33%	37 - 6	84%
Ninotsminda	32857	95.78%	23 - 2	91.3%
Akhalsikhe	16879	36.59%	7 - 30	23,3%
Akhalsikhe <i>town</i>	?	?	3 - 15	20%
Tsalka	11484	54.98%	13 - 45	28%

According to this charter it is obvious that even in the district where Armenians are living compactly their percentage in Sakrebulo is less in comparing with the percentage of population. Although there are many Armenians involved in the political processes on the local level where they are populated compactly, their participation is not adequate to the number they are and it is low.

**Knowledge of state language:** These regions suffer from a shortage of teachers and the number of admissions in national schools has been in constant decline. Despite constitutional provisions, Georgian language dominates in many areas of society and therefore mastery of the official national language is often a pre-condition for political, economic and social integration. Access to media and information in minority languages is often difficult. Minorities also find it difficult to access the Georgian state, as federal laws are published solely in Georgian.

Because there is no effective state support for Georgian language training, the younger generations tend to speak no language other than their mother tongue. If this situation continues, minorities risk soon being unable to communicate with the rest of the population and suffering economic and social marginalization. Political representation is also an issue, both on national and to some extent on local levels.

**Disseminated:** There are two cities where the numbers of Armenians exceed 5%, Tbilisi and Batumi. Also there are some other municipalities where Armenians are more than 5% out of total population.

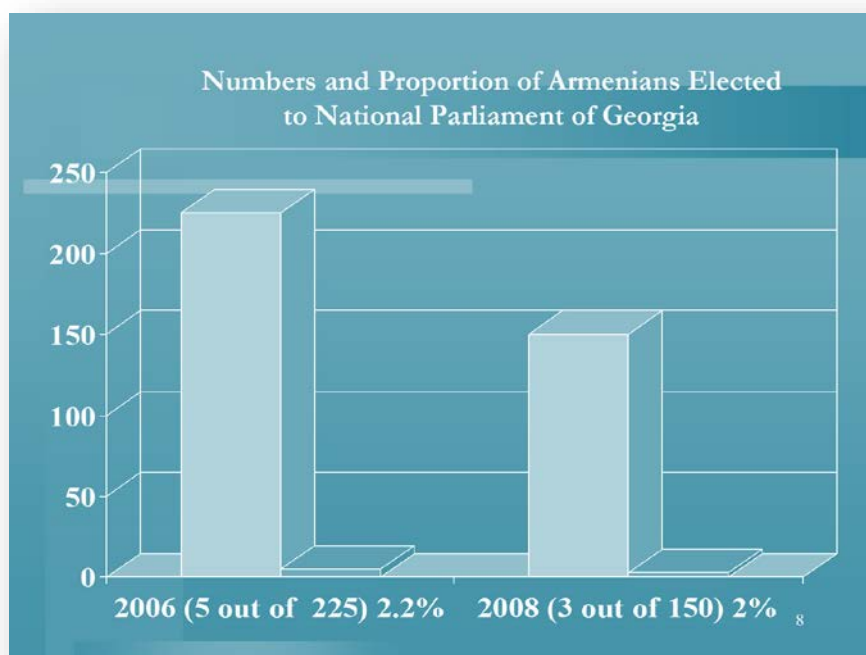
<sup>3</sup> This percentage is the electoral barrier therefore we compare with it.

Municipality	Armenians Census 2002 Total/Percentage		Representation of Armenians in Sakrebulo as of 2014	
			Arm-Other	
Tbilisi	82586	7.63%	0 - 40	0%
Batumi	7517	6.17%	0 - 25	0%
Marneuli	9329	7.89%	3 - 33	9.09%
Tetritsyaro	2632	10.38%	1 - 35	2.85%
Bolnisi	4316	5.81%	1 - 29	3.44%

As we see on the charter representation of Armenians in the region where they are not majority and are living disseminated are even lesser than compactly populated areas. The situation with cities are the worst than in rural areas.

**Knowledge of state language:** In deference with compactly populated areas Armenians from the cities and disseminated regions have better understand of state language. And on the contrary in the cities like Tbilisi and Batumi the problem is not the knowledge of Georgian but mother tongue. Since 1991 five out of 8 Armenian schools/sectors were closed in Tbilisi and all schools in Batumi.

**Parliament:** Before 2008 there were 250 members in Georgian national Parliament. Within the period of 1992-2008 there were at least 5 Armenians elected and represented in the states main representative body. Majoritarians from densely populated areas, (Tsalka, Akhalakali, Ninotsminda, Akhaltsikhe) and from the proportional system representative from Tbilisi. After 2008 changes that have been made in the electoral system number of parliament seats decreased up to 150. Thus during the Parlamental elections in 2008 and 2012 only 3 Armenians were elected to the Parliament, two majoritarians from Javakheti (Akhalakali, Ninotsminda) and one from the party list (from Tbilisi). It is noteworthy that Armenian representative from Tbilisi always was in the party list of state ruling party and often one person was set in the party list several times.



As shown in the table above, the number and percentage of Armenians elected to Georgia's national Parliament has markedly decreased to its lowest level in the history of independent Georgia in the last national elections in 2008 and 2014. Only 3 Armenians or 2% of members of Parliament, it is when the percentage of Armenians total population in Georgia are almost three times more (248,929-5.7%).

There no Armenians in Adjara's autonomous republic's central representative body called *Umaghlesi Sabcho* or Highest Council.

### **Importance of political participation**

Participation of minorities in the political process is very important component for the peaceful, stable and prosperous country. If state does not provide the right or does not create the conditions for political and social participation for minorities, they try to find the ways and demand the rights to be insured and implemented. Often demands transformed into the conflicts. Like it was in former Yugoslavia, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan etc.

All ethnic conflicts that happened in Europe and post-Soviet countries are based on the demand of minorities for the realization of their rights. To avoid such conflicts state should recognize the rights of minorities.

First of all such issue should be in the centre of attention of governments of the countries where significant the number of minorities exist. State should work out strategies, programs and policies also on the legislative level. Various international organizations have worked out many international legal instruments that regulate the rights of ethnic or religious minorities. For instance, Council of Europe, United Nations or OCSE.

### **United Nations**

- ✓ International Convention on Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination
- ✓ Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (Adopted by General Assembly resolution 47/135 of 18 December 1992)
- ✓ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

### **Council of Europe**

- ✓ European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages - 1992
- ✓ Framework Convention for the Protection of National - 1995

### **OCSE**

- ✓ The Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public Life - 1999
- ✓ The Oslo Recommendations Regarding the Linguistic Rights of National - 1998

This international laws give opportunity for the minorities to become a part of the country be engaged in the socio-political process of the country.

### **State Policy Georgia toward minorities**

**Political participation:** Since its independence nor Georgia's government nor political elite (political parties) have not done any sufficient steps toward the integration of minorities into political life of country. The genuine participation of ethnic minorities is especially low (though their formal turnout in elections is relatively high). Situation with regard to the political participation of the minorities in general and in the elections in particular is still very poor and complicated. It is first of all caused by the general underprivileged conditions of the minorities, their isolation from the major political processes and low level of legal literacy. Mentioned fact of the translation of the ballots is very remarkable (as it is stated in the paragraph 374 of the State Report), however it should be noted that translation of the ballots has been conducted by NGOs, as well as the most part of the awareness activities in the field.

**Strategy:** On 2009 the Government of Georgia adopted the National Concept and Action Plan for Tolerance and Civic Integration, which aims to create an environment of tolerance and respect in Georgia; to promote equal opportunities for all citizens; to ensure effective participation of ethnic minorities in all spheres of life and to create and develop necessary conditions for the preservation of their culture and identity. But almost 80% of activities of this strategy was about teaching state language. Out of this we can say that Georgian authorities think that it is the main or even the only obstacle for minority's integration.

**State Language barrier:** In order to study the state language in areas mainly inhabited by the national minority, following projects have been implemented in Georgia: 1. "Georgian Language for Future Success", which aims the deployment of Master students in the national minority areas to study the state language. 2. In the framework of "Teach Georgian as a second language" program, qualified teachers were sent to various schools of Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti regions in order to increase the knowledge of Georgian language. Public Defender assesses these programs positively, since they serve the development of knowledge of Georgian language in the local population.

In 2011, textbooks for primary level Georgian language, as a second language were published and distributed to non-Georgian schools. Translation of subject manuals started in 2010 by the following percentage ratio: 70% has been translated into minority languages (Armenian, Azeri, Russian), and 30% in state (Georgian) language. Such approach has changed since 2012; in particular, 70% of texts in published books were translated, though this translation was provided in mixed form (one paragraph - the state language, paragraph 2 - Azeri / Armenian language). According to the teachers, students and teachers in non-Georgian schools are not ready for teaching and learning with bilingual textbooks. Majority of the teachers do not speak national language, therefore, there is clearly negative attitude toward new kind of textbooks in the regions.

In 2011, the Ministry of Education and Science in the framework of the project "Georgian Language Program" allocated funding to Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki Georgian Language Houses (Samtskhe – Javakheti) and for Georgian Language Centres in Dmanisi, Marneuli, Bolnisi and Gardabani (Kvemo Kartli). "Language houses" operate in regions where national minorities live. From October 1, 2011 Georgian Language Houses (Akhalkalaki, Ninotsminda, Marneuli and Bolnisi) were administered by the Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration. In 2012, new Georgian language houses were established in Tsalka and Iormuganlo. In 2012, it was decided to employ "teach Georgian as a second

language" teachers at language houses. Trainers participating in the program were intensively teaching Georgian language to local teachers in Samtskhe - Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli.

In 2013 language houses has been closed. To take an example of Akhalkalaki language house, 18 groups of public officials and 12 groups for school teachers operated at language houses during 2011-2012. Since 2012, the groups were operational only for school teachers (128 listeners). Out of 128 participants only 111 passed the full course. Participants undertook the final test and were issued certificates. Despite large number of applicants, the teaching process stopped in 2013. Unfortunately, the decision regarding resumption of training courses have not been adopted yet.<sup>4</sup>

As we see that state do is providing the opportunity for minorities to learn state language. Nothing have more done yet to change the system or policy for the active participation in the political life of country.

## **Conclusion**

**Analyze:** Taking into consideration what were said in the above we may conclude that in many cases the issues of minorities living compactly defers from the issues and problems of them who lives in the big cities or dispersed. For instance despite good knowledge of state language Armenian minority in Tbilisi or Batumi (where they are almost 8%) are not represented in local legislative (representative) body called *Sakrebulo*. While Armenians of Javakheti (Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda municipalities) who are weak in state language are almost fully represented in local *Sakrebulos*. Despite this fact almost every local and international or state organizations problem of integration links with language barrier and believe that it is the main obstacle to the political and social integration of minorities living in Georgia.

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<sup>4</sup> Public defenders report