ETHNIC RELATIONS

NATIONAL MINORITIES: CIVIL INTEGRATION IN GEORGIA

Guram SVANIDZE

*Ph.D. (Philos.),
employee at the Committee of Civil Integration,
Georgian Parliament
(Tbilisi, Georgia)*

I

The political and legislative communities long ignored the problem of civil integration of national minorities for the simple reason that the nation had had no time to overcome so-called ethno-national thinking. Its apologists regard minorities as part of an ethno-nation with a statehood of its own, or as an ethno-nation living in a state where it forms a numerically small group with no statehood at all. In this way, statehood and an ethno-national community were considered identical to the extent that the terms could hardly be separated.[1]

The doctrine was equally accepted by *the titular and non-titular ethnoses.* Its extreme manifestation took the form of ethno-egotism and a "feverish ethnic consciousness;" and general civic principles were pushed aside for the sake of egotistical group interests. The most extreme interpretations of ethno-nationalism result in regimes that tend, on the one hand, toward latent or even obvious ethnic purges. On the other, such manifestations urge national minorities to demand re-division of territories and force them to shift their loyalty from the country they live in to their historical homeland. The non-dominating ethnoses tend to suspect the state of favoring the dominant group at the

---

[1] See: A. Eide, *Peaceful and Constructive Resolutions of Situations Involving Minorities,* U.N. University, 1995.

expense of the rest. On the other hand, the dominant ethnic group suspects the ethnic minorities of ethnic egotism, etc.

Ethnic nationalism has already caused segmentation of Georgian society, which constitutes a mêlée of ethnic communities that are diverse but unable to find unity. This created a paradox: part of the Georgian educational infrastructure serves the minorities; there are minorities-oriented media that manage to keep afloat; and there is freedom of communication with the historical homeland. This never led, and could not lead, to integration, instead it deepened disintegration. Under Soviet power, however, this did not bother anyone.

The empire's Center struck a balance between the population majority and the minorities. It preached proletarian internationalism, an ideology that bestowed the role of a unifying and consolidating force on the Russian nation. The nomenklatura mechanism helped to maintain a balance in state administration and relations among the Soviet nations.

The balancing factors disappeared along with the Soviet Union to allow ethnocratic trends to promptly move to the fore. Under President Gamsakhurdia, the institutions of statehood were destroyed to please ethnocracy, while state interests deteriorated into narrow sub-ethnic interests. The idea of civic awareness died along with the status of Soviet citizen, while the political vocabulary acquired new tags: "masters," who belonged to the titular nation, and "guests," which implied the national minorities.

The ethnocratic regimes of Abkhazia[2] and South Ossetia supplied an example of another extreme: the small ethnoses saw this as the only chance of setting up independent states and establishing apartheid to remain dominant ethnoses.

The regimes never intended switching from one type of internal integration to another qualitatively new one that would regard civil institutions as *a priority* in which all citizens are equal irrespective of their ethnic origin.

Today, it has become fairly obvious that the Georgian public and its political establishment have become aware of the mistakes committed by the national liberation movement of the early 1990s. The inherited problems have not yet been resolved, while public sentiments display a lot of inertia. National minorities are still divorced from public life; their civil awareness is barely developed, while knowledge of the state tongue is weak or absent. Their representation in the state administrative structures is inadequate; there are separatist enclaves on Georgian territory and latent irredentist trends in the areas populated by compact groups of national minorities. There is a slow yet steady process of cultural, economic, and even political incorporation of certain regions into adjacent states, obvious in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and similar latent processes in Lower Kartli and Javakhetia, regions of compact settlement of Azeris and Armenians, respectively, which border on their historical homelands. This undermines regional and international security and upsets the region's historical balance of forces.

Other negative factors, such as outside impact strongly felt in the areas of frozen ethnic conflicts, also come into play. Openly hostile political and economic measures, as well as propaganda and information wars, have created considerable problems and interfered with conflict settlement and integration in general.

There are numerous remnants of ethnic nationalism in the political and legislative practices:[3] the outrageous habit of talking about prominent people's ethnic origin born from deeply rooted mutual mistrust is the most typical manifestation of ethno-national thinking. The minorities side

---

[2] MINELRES-L Mailing List Archive - January 2001. G. Svanidze, "A Dangerous Balance: An Essay on Caucasian Mentality," 9k. 17/1/2001 [www.minelres.lv/january2001].

[3] The author witnessed the described events; the quoted opinions are his personal choice or are based on his conversations with people involved in lawmaking in the Georgian parliament.

with politicians of the same ethnic origin, while the majority tends to doubt their loyalty. Those who insist on discussing the ethnic side draw on historical experience and political tension in the region.

Some people go as far as differentiating the minorities by the degree of their loyalty to the state; the people are also divided into those who conceal their ethnic origin and those who refuse to do this. As a rule, the former are less trusted than the latter, who, incidentally, may even be liked.

This leads to absurdities: a request by one of the parliament deputies asking his colleagues to reveal their own and their closest relatives' ethnic origin caused quite a stir: "fascism" and "xenophobia" were the most frequently heard epithets, even though the culprit couched his request in assurances of his love for all the nationalities living in Georgia. This suggested to some experts that the Georgian parliamentarians were not proud of their ethnic connections and preferred to keep mum about them. Other experts concluded that under normal conditions such questions are either not asked at all or do not cause a stir if they are voiced.

The bill on amendments to the law on civil status acts and its discussion in the parliament tested the political establishment's readiness to accept civil society standards. The legislature and the public at large became agitated: there was no agreement on whether identification documents should mention ethnic origin or not. It was at that point that the remnants of ethno-national thinking fully betrayed themselves once more.

Society, unable to distinguish between the Soviet (ethno-national) and "new" (civil) interpretation of the term "nation," drove itself into a frenzy. Those who did not want ethnic origin to be mentioned in identification documents argued that this would consolidate civil psychology and corresponding institutions, as well as help to overcome ethnocratic trends both among the minorities and the titular nations. These people insisted that ethnic origin could and should not be regulated by the state. Any mention of ethnic origin in identification documents was taken as discrimination against and segregation of the national minorities: should a person be identified by his ethnic affiliation?

On the other hand, there were fears that the adoption of amendments might encourage dangerous trends in places where national minorities lived in compact groups; those who in favor of mentioning ethnic origin said that both the Georgian and non-Georgian population would find it hard to reconcile themselves to the amendments: they would perceive this step as an attempt to deprive them of their nationality.

Those who wanted to see ethnic origin mentioned in identification documents proceeded from the assumption that the titular nation's domination remained unprotected, demographically among other things. They went on to say that members of national minorities would find such mention more assuring than the mere mention of their citizenship and that state policy would finally arrive at more specific ethnic policies.

There was also the opinion that only internally integrated states could afford to drop the mention of ethnic origin from identification documents. In Georgia, however, the titular nation still had to prop up its domination by means of ethnic conflicts. At the same time, the national minorities are afraid of forced assimilation.

In a country where the ethnic issue is still a hotly disputed topic, "Georgian" cannot be written in identification documents carried by people of other ethnic origins: both the Georgian ethnocentrists and minorities would find this hard to accept.

Turning to the experience of developed states was of no help: there is any number of them to confirm both points. Manipulation of the concepts will not lead anywhere either.

The country meanwhile needs a balanced policy that can protect the national minorities and promote civil integration. In the absence of a developed conceptual approach, the concepts remain vague; the same can be said about the issue's academic and legislative aspects. In the ab-

sence of a system of priorities, no laws can be passed; therefore, the field for making compromises in politics and lawmaking remains limited. There was no consistency either: lawmaking remained a fairly sporadic process; political will was weak, while power could not reconcile itself with reality.

Today the national question is also seen as a highly sensitive and politically risky issue. More than once the public nervously responded to the parliamentary debates on many questions. It should be said that Georgia failed to live up to certain international responsibilities related to the national minorities issue it assumed when it joined the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, as well as when it ratified the corresponding documents. Stormy discussions distracted the parliament from ratifying the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities: this was finally done on 8 May, 2005 after numerous reminders to ratify.

II

The legacy the young Georgian democracy inherited from the past was extremely contradictory: on the one hand, the Georgian people can be justifiably proud of their tolerance; on the other, they have to overcome ethno-national thinking.

To finally realize the *policy of civil integration of national minorities*, they *should be* actively and efficiently *involved* in public life and state governance. The country needs a socializing environment that will create a social subject with acute civil awareness for participating effectively and freely in social life and state administration. People should be able to contribute to the creation of material and cultural values *irrespective of their ethnic origin.* Such a socializing environment can only be achieved in a law-based state.

Ethnicity is not something negative: protection of the rights of national minorities presupposes its further development and protection. Here is a hierarchically arranged context:

- *The first level* comprises the rights to life, to self-identification without any hindrances, etc.

- These rights allow the individual to enjoy the civil and political rights that form the *second level*, at which the individual-citizen realizes his rights and fulfills his duties.

- The *third level* is the level of special rights, which are not privileges but other forms of protection of vulnerable population groups, including minorities interested in protecting their ethnic identity.

The levels are interconnected: the guaranteed rights and freedoms of the first two levels are conducive to the realization of rights and freedoms of any individual associated with any of special groups, etc.

Special rights are one of the balancing factors: if ignored or hypertrophied, they upset the balance between the levels. Under adverse conditions, an individual is alienated from his civic duties. If general civic interests are replaced by a group's private interests, affiliation with an ethnic group becomes all-important.

The resulting phenomena are direct opposites of integration. One of them is *segregation,* a targeted policy of exclusion of certain population groups (national minorities in our case) from public, economic, and cultural life. Segregation is complemented with minorities' *self-isolation,* their unwillingness to be drawn into public life.

Separatism and *irredentism* describe crisis phenomena: active opposition of an ethnic group to society as a whole and state institutions, as well as to the titular nation. The opposition is even more active when the ethnic group aims at territorial separation.

I have already written that the vague nature of the term "integration" creates certain problems when it comes to formulating policy in this sphere. Not infrequently members of the public, when speaking at forums and writing in the press, voiced their doubts about integration. It was suspected to be a version of assimilation; what is more—assimilation with the titular nation. This fear goes to the extreme: the demand to learn the state tongue is taken as an attempt at forced assimilation. There is the opinion that the national minorities' special rights encouraged speculations of all sorts. In fact, there is no assimilation problem in Georgia—there are problems of integration of the minorities. This means that specific ethnic features and languages are not endangered, while ignorance of the state language is not infrequent among the national minorities.

Integration is a dialectical process that reflects the unity and conflict of the general (citizenship) and the particular (ethnic affiliation) and presupposes their internal balance. *Assimilation* in its forced forms upsets the balance between the opposites. It ignores the need to protect, preserve, and develop the language, culture, specific features of the national (ethnic) minorities, and their purposeful leveling out during the integration process.

The principle of free choice of identification with any national minority is deemed especially important; under Art 3 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and other documents, this choice should not incur unwelcome consequences. The individual aspect of this choice is complemented with the right of the individual "to preserve and develop this identity" "in community with others," that is collectively (as Art 3 and the preamble to the Framework Convention put it).

This suggests that *assimilation* can be *voluntary* and presupposes that an individual rejects his/her self-identification with any national (ethnic) minority of his own free will, which is accompanied by either civil assimilation (when a person abandons his/her self-identification with any of the ethnoses and identifies himself/herself with the institutions of citizenship, which can be described as internal cosmopolitanism), or ethnic assimilation when the person identifies himself/herself with the titular nation.

The Humanitarian House NGO put forward an interesting opinion: it pointed to the possibility of either voluntary or involuntary rejection of ethnic identification in favor of civic identity; the institution of citizenship is a more universal phenomenon than ethnic affiliation. It was suggested that a blanket term, "Iberians," should be used to describe all citizens of Georgia (I regret to say that the thesis never reached the press).

We should distinguish between the relations among ethnic groups (the titular nation and other ethnoses) and between ethnic groups and the political, legal, as well as state institutions. These collisions are frequently identified, especially under conditions of ethno-national consciousness. In some cases, a purely political conflict is interpreted as ethnic (between the dominant and non-dominant ethnoses) with a lot of ethnic hatred. This fully applies to the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In fact, there were no conditions for ethnic conflicts there since the ethnoses are very close, while the differences were not potentially bloody. More than that, the Abkhazians and Ossets as ethnoses had a much more progressive infrastructure compared to other Soviet ethnic groups, which allowed them to develop their identities. It was the ethnic elites' desire to gain political domination and monopoly access to the local resources that triggered the conflicts.

The fact that the Georgian tongue and culture, as well as historical traditions, serve as an integrating foundation is an important principle of such integration. From this it follows that inter-national relations in Georgia are determined, to a great extent, by the Georgians' status as the titular nation and the pillar of Georgian statehood. This should not contradict the principles of a multi-culture as one of the historical acquisitions of all the people of Georgia. It should serve as an efficient factor for perfecting the institutions of statehood and as a condition of real interaction and mutual enrichment of cultures.

The above suggests that the situation of the minorities (Abkhazians and Ossets) should not be compared with the position of the French speakers in Belgium, as this is sometimes done. We all know that, despite their comparatively small numbers, the French speakers are not regarded as a minority. It is unwise to draw upon this unique experience, since it is fraught with grave conflicts, as history has demonstrated.

Traditional tolerance is an important factor of civil integration. If a scale of tolerance is drawn, the "resolution power" of tolerance in Georgia is much higher than in many other countries. Our country is characterized by a centuries-long linguistic and cultural diversity that is unique in its breadth and depth.

At the same time, tolerance in Georgia is rooted in the postulates of a traditional society and traditional consciousness, which have long helped to preserve stability among the ethnic communities, thus ensuring, first, coexistence and, second, integration. Accelerated social processes and market relations have already destroyed traditional stereotypes and given rise to crisis phenomena, such as persecution of members of non-traditional confessions. The civic integration policy should create a social, psychological, and ideological background conducive to even greater resolution power of the institutions of tolerance and their flexibility, in order to adjust them to the rapidly changing social conditions. Traditional attitudes should be replaced by axiological categories: while the former are limited by the customary interpretation of the situation, which does not involve reflection, the latter not only mean that civic interests are rationally perceived, but also teach society to treat them as values. These processes lead to a higher level of civil self-awareness and civil patriotism.

III

The multisided nature of national policy makes the process very complicated; there is a wide range of attributes related to the phenomenon of minorities: different numerical strength, type of settlement (either compact or disperse), and the history of their migration to Georgia. There are ethnic political autonomies. Minorities belong to different religions. It is hard to overestimate the impact made by the historical homeland (which is strong if it is located next to the regions of compact settlement), or by its absence. Significantly, in some places members of the titular nations are in the minority and have to cope with similar problems.

In the past, Georgia's ethnic diversity was used as an argument against the law on minorities, even though the country had to pass it when it joined the Council of Europe. It was suggested instead that a set of laws be passed to embrace a whole range of related issues.

There are three types of minority-related issues.

- *First,* ethnic, which includes the problems of minorities living in compact groups or dispersed across the territory.

- *Second,* regional, related to cases when the traditional problems of preservation and development of specific features of the minorities are associated with problems of administrative-territorial arrangement of the regions in which the minorities live compactly and are in the majority.

- *Third,* political, related to political autonomy issues.

Each of the types can use different strategies for protecting the rights of the minorities and promoting their civil integration. For example, the institutions of cultural autonomy can be used to settle problems of the first type; federalization and regional status issues can be applied to the second type;

and the third deals with optimization of political relations and distribution of power between the center and the autonomy.

Today, the *first* aspect is amply covered by the laws (on culture, education, etc.). There are still no traces of an institution of national-cultural autonomy that would allow all citizens of Georgia who belong to different national communities (small and dispersed included) to deal with the problems of preservation and development of their traditions, culture, language, and education.

In the absence of absolute clarity in the state's administrative-territorial division, the *regional* aspect remains undeveloped. So far, it is presented by the institution of presidential representatives in the regions, but this can hardly be taken as a model for the country's future federative structure. The situation with the *political* aspect is much more complicated because it deals with the tasks of restoring civil peace and territorial integrity.

Meanwhile, the problems related to these levels are closely interconnected: unless we stumble across their best possible correlation, we will not be able to cope with the problem of integrating minorities, which is not facilitated by the continuing vagueness about the concepts of regionalization, federalization, and autonomization.

I think that federalization (regionalization) should be rooted in the historical tradition of economic and political expediency and the division of labor inside the country, which is expected to create domestic market. The territorial aspect of federalization is in principle fraught with conflicts—if given ethnic hues, it will become even more conflict-prone. In this case, the re-division of territories among the federation subjects will be burdened with ethnic issues.

Our most recent history has been aggravated by autonomy-related conflicts; international experts (A. Eide, among others) believe that there is no alternative to preserving or elevating this status because if degraded for any reason it will cause trouble.

This makes interpretation of the right of nations to self-determination extremely important. The norm presupposes that when realized it should not contradict sovereignty, the state system, territorial integrity, or the country's political independence. It relies on the principle of equality of all citizens and the priority of human rights (internal self-determination). External self-determination is associated with a worldwide consensus, the criteria of which have not yet been formulated. For this reason, it causes crises with grave consequences for the world order.

Art 4 of the Constitution of Georgia proclaimed the right of nations to self-determination, according to which the parliament will consist of two chambers (the Council of the Republic and the Senate, which will include representatives of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Ajaria, and other territorial units) when adequate conditions are created.

We should proceed from the assumption that sovereignty as a qualitative rather than quantitative category cannot be divided. The rights of internally self-determining nations can be reshuffled, but the sovereign right of *all the people of Georgia* to decide the future of their state, territorial integrity, etc. should not be placed in doubt.

C o n c l u s i o n

Georgian society needs intensified integration for its development; the rights of national minorities should be protected by the priority of the universal principles of citizenship as applied to them all. Apart from a purely humanitarian effect, the equal and effective involvement of all citizens, irrespective of their ethnic origin, in state administration will become a confidence-building measure. It will help to prevent conflicts or settle them and to upgrade the quality of the legitimacy of Georgian statehood.

Harmonious integration is our main aim: ethnic minorities should not merely live side by side; their cultures should be involved in mutual penetration and mutual enrichment to increase society's creative potential. This form of integration will finally create a dynamic system of relations between the state and ethnic groups. These processes are promoted by the freedom of each person to identify himself/herself with any ethnic group and with state citizenship. Harmonized processes create a viable and sustainable system—an indispensable factor under the conditions of intensifying and accelerating globalization.

Today, it is extremely important for us to know the extent to which the internal integration of Georgian society will outstrip the globalization phenomena unfolding in our republic. Under favorable conditions, we shall achieve a diverse and flexible social milieu; otherwise society, burdened by its inner multi-cultural nature, will be unable to respond to the challenges of globalization.