

State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2016 - Georgia

Publisher [Minority Rights Group International](#)

Publication Date 12 July 2016

Cite as Minority Rights Group International, *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2016 - Georgia*, 12 July 2016, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5796083415.html> [accessed 18 January 2017]

Disclaimer This is not a UNHCR publication. UNHCR is not responsible for, nor does it necessarily endorse, its content. Any views expressed are solely those of the author or publisher and do not necessarily reflect those of UNHCR, the United Nations or its Member States.

Events of 2015

Preliminary results from Georgia's 2014 census, the first in more than a decade, were released during the year, showing that the country's population as at the beginning of 2015 was just 3.7 million, compared to a little below 4.4 million in 2002. Though the official figures are widely disputed, they nevertheless indicate that Georgia's population has been shrinking. Demographic decline is not a new phenomenon in Georgia, however: in its early years of independence, a large number of Armenians, Greeks, Jews, Russians and other minorities left the country amid fears of rising ethno-nationalism, economic insecurity and the escalation of civil conflict in the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and then Abkhazia, now a *de facto* separatist republic. While many have left the country in the years since, emigration levels have been disproportionately high among minorities, meaning their representation within Georgia has declined markedly. Despite significant progress in certain areas, including a number of recent measures to support the full participation of minorities in public life, the country's history of division continues to be felt to this day, reflected in ongoing tensions over minority languages, religions and cultures. Religiously motivated violence and an inadequate response from law-enforcement agencies to address the problem have also persisted, despite efforts to promote integration.

As Georgia is a largely Orthodox Christian country, the Orthodox Church's resurgence since the end of Soviet rule has heavily influenced the development of Georgian nationalism. In addition to widespread popular support, the Church's position has also been strengthened through a 2002 agreement with the state that provides official recognition and a range of benefits that include tax relief, exemptions and a significant role in the country's education system. Minority religions, in contrast, are often seen as a threat to Georgian identity, particularly when a specific ethnicity is perceived to have ties with nearby countries – for example, the description of Georgian Muslims in some media outlets as 'Turks'. In some state schools, particularly in the autonomous republic of Adjara bordering Turkey, Muslim students have reportedly been stigmatized and even at times faced pressure to convert – a situation that, as described by the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) in its 2015 opinion, undermines the legal principle of the school as a 'neutral space where religious indoctrination, proselytism and forced assimilation are forbidden'.

As a separatist republic still lacking international recognition, language and identity are also strongly contested issues in Abkhazia, which declared independence from Georgia following its secession in the 1990s. In this context, ethnic Georgians living in the region are still marginalized from public life. This is especially evident in Gali, one of the most volatile areas near the border of Abkhazia, where officially only instruction in Abkhaz and Russian is permitted at the pre-school and primary level, meaning that Georgian language speakers are denied the right to receive education in their mother tongue. Some families have reportedly been forced to move to the Zugdidi region in western Georgia so that their children can attend Georgian schools.

While the Ministry of Culture and Monument Protection of Georgia and other government bodies have taken steps to protect important minority heritage sites such as mosques, as well as provide some support to contemporary cultural activities such as theatrical productions in minority languages, the contribution of Georgia's minority traditions to the country's heritage is often undervalued. Furthermore, while many religious and cultural monuments belonging to minorities are in need of immediate rehabilitation, recent research has suggested that less than 1 per cent of funding provided by cities and towns to religious organizations, including for the preservation of buildings, went to non-Orthodox groups. Furthermore, in parts of the country the construction of new places of worship by minority communities is still constrained by regulations and local resistance. During 2015, Muslims in Batumi, the capital of Adjara region, continued to be denied permission to build a second mosque in the city – an ongoing issue – obstructed by nationalist politicians who have attacked the proposal as a threat to Georgian identity. Other religious minorities, such as Catholics and Jehovah's Witnesses, have also experienced barriers in securing permission to construct churches or Kingdom Halls. These and other restrictions highlight the continued need, as emphasized by the FCNM Advisory Committee during the year, for authorities to promote the 'integration of society while fully valuing and respecting its ethnic, cultural, religious, and language diversity'.

Copyright notice: © Minority Rights Group International. All rights reserved.