



State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2015 - Georgia

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In June, Georgia signed an association agreement with the European Union (EU), initialled at the Eastern Partnership Vilnius Summit of November 2013. The agreement, which was ratified by the Georgian parliament on 18 July, is a decisive step in the country's reform process and includes provisions on the protection and inclusion of minorities. As part of its developing relationship with the EU, Georgia has also committed to a four-year communication and information strategy that explicitly underlines that specific efforts should be undertaken to ensure that minorities in Georgia receive information in a language that they understand. In May the government also adopted an anti-discrimination law that prohibits discrimination on religious, ethnic or other grounds, though the legislation was modified from its original version following strong resistance from the Orthodox Church, particularly over its provisions on sexual orientation.

Though Georgia contains a variety of religious minority communities, including Muslims, various non-Orthodox Christian denominations and other faith groups such as Bahá'í, with freedom of religion guaranteed in the Constitution, the majority Orthodox Church has played an increasing role in recent years in the country's political life. Numerous human rights organizations have highlighted instances where the Orthodox Church has received preferential treatment from the state, while at the same time many minority communities have experienced discrimination. Despite its legislative framework on anti-discrimination and the creation of a new state agency on religious affairs in 2014, increased attacks on Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses have been recorded across Georgia, including numerous incidents in different villages where the rights of Muslims were infringed by the local population, often with the involvement of local authorities and police officers. Furthermore, some civil society groups and religious leaders have expressed concern about the mandate of the newly established Agency of Religious Issues, fearing it might be used by the government to control religious organizations.

Despite the many positive legal developments in Georgia during the year, including the adoption of the 2014-20 National Human Rights Strategy and an action plan for its implementation, other legislation had negative implications for minorities in the country. In particular, the Law of Georgia on Stateless Persons and Refugees, adopted on 1 September, has decreased the length of visa-free stay for foreigners in Georgia from 360 days to 90 days in any 180-day period. The law also cancelled the visa-free regime with 24 countries. These new migration policies have created serious problems for foreigners who are permanent residents of Georgia and for former citizens of Georgia whose citizenship was suspended because they were granted citizenship of another

country. Among those affected are ethnic Armenians living in Georgia's southern Samtskhe-Javakheti region, since many travel to Russia every year to work as manual labourers. Before the passing of the new legislation, Armenian citizens were able to live in Georgia without any additional documents, as long as they crossed a state border once every year.

Georgia's urban landscape has changed rapidly since its independence in 1991. The transition towards a market economy was accompanied by economic decline and increasing regional disparities due to the difficulties of moving from a rural to an urban economy. Much of the country's urban life is concentrated in the capital, Tbilisi, where almost half of the country's urban population is based. While Tbilisi is responsible for over 50 per cent of national production, other regions are less developed. For example, the regions of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli – the only two of Georgia's nine regions in which minorities make up a majority of the population – have struggled to keep up with the rapid economic growth of the capital. Both remain predominantly agricultural regions.

Rural-urban disparities have reinforced existing inequalities experienced by certain minority populations. These gaps are especially evident in terms of service access: for example, only 29 per cent of the households in Samtskhe-Javakheti and 44 per cent in Kvemo Kartli have bathroom facilities. Regional disparities, poverty and unemployment have been flagged as key priorities by the government in the new Social-Economic Development Strategy for 2020, which if implemented could benefit a large proportion of Georgia's minorities.

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