



**SEPTEMBER 2020 |
POLICY PAPER**

Do Ethnic Minorities Benefit from Georgia's Europeanization?

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GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS



With the support of the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



POLICY PAPER

September 2020 | Issue #17

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HOW TO QUOTE THIS DOCUMENT:

Levan Kakhishvili, *"Do ethnic minorities benefit from Georgia's Europeanization?"*, Policy Paper #17, Georgian Institute of Politics, September 2020.

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Executive Summary

Georgia's Europeanization has resulted in opportunities and both tangible and intangible benefits for Georgian society at large. However, as ethnic minorities are poorly integrated into Georgian social and political life, it is important to explore to what extent minority communities can access and enjoy these opportunities and benefits. This paper views Europeanization as formal rule transfer through a policy of conditionality and investigates how minorities perceive its consequences. The research is based on six focus group discussions conducted in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti regions and on 12 expert interviews with public officials, experts of minority issues, and representatives of civil society. The data suggests that there are dividing opinions regarding the accessibility to the benefits of Europeanization among members of minority communities. Some believe that there are significant benefits in the fields of visa liberalization, as well as positive changes in politics and governance, the economy and employment, and education and social issues. However, other research participants reported that it is impossible to access these benefits because of a lack of information, language barriers and the simple disbelief that these benefits are for people like them. This paper discusses all these issues and provides recommendations for the government of Georgia, civil society organizations, European Union (EU) representatives and the international community.

Key words: Georgia, Europeanization, ethnic minorities, rule transfer.

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Introduction

Europeanization, as understood in this paper, implies formal rule transfer to the country wishing to establish closer ties and possibly eventual membership in the European Union. It is widely believed that this rule transfer is beneficial to the third countries for both material and immaterial reasons. However, countries often adopt norms and rules in a formal context only while not caring how these rules are implemented or if the benefits reach the average citizen. Following these considerations, this paper explores Georgia's Europeanization and to what extent ethnic minorities enjoy access to the associated benefits, and, conversely, what barriers they face. Ethnic minorities in Georgia, especially in the areas of compact settlement in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti are still facing problems with integration, e.g. social and economic problems (Bogishvili and Osepashvili 2017), political participation (Kakhishvili 2018) and access to information (Bogishvili and Tsiklauri 2017). As such, minority communities in Georgia are vulnerable to a variety of problems and it is important to ensure their access to the benefits of Europeanization.

There are three main criteria for making sense of Europeanization as a political phenomenon. First, Europeanization can be divided into two stages: the accession stage and the post-accession stage. Second, Europeanization can be understood as either a top-down or bottom-up process. A top-down process refers to what happens when the EU uses conditionality as an instrument to ensure a third country's compliance. On the other hand, Europeanization as a bottom-up process refers to how political actors try to "upload" their own goals to the European level or in the Georgian context to the agenda of EU-Georgia relations. Finally, Europeanization can be driven by two different sets of factors: cost-benefit calculations, and a process of mutually (re)shaping the norms and interests of political actors. Minority issues can be important to any of these aspects of Europeanization. Rational cost-benefit calculations can influence a given government's decision to adopt required legal changes but it does not necessarily mean that the country has successfully socialized into European norms (Sasse 2008). The government often formally fulfills the conditions required by the EU, but implementation remains questionable (Minesashvili and Kakhishvili 2015). Overall, to achieve increased socialization and a sense of ownership among minorities regarding the setting of a political agenda in the country, the Georgian government should especially focus on public engagement in minority communities.

This paper draws on original data from six focus group discussions conducted in minority-populated regions of Georgia – Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti – as well as 12 in-depth interviews with experts and public officials. An analysis of the data demonstrates that the conditions which makes ethnic minorities special in the Georgian context is that they have problems accessing not only benefits of rule transfer but often basic public services. The reasons for this are many-fold and vary depending on what specific services are considered. At the same time, since the data collection with participation of persons belonging to ethnic minorities takes place in the regions, it is difficult to distinguish whether some of the barriers in terms of enjoying benefits of Europeanization are minority-specific or whether all regions in Georgia face similar issues. Overall, the research shows that minority

communities, especially in the rural areas suffer from language barriers, a lack of accessible information, and a disbelief in the accessibility of benefits of Europeanization. Furthermore, the research suggests that the benefits of Europeanization cannot properly be delivered to minority communities in Georgia unless public institutions are as accessible for minorities as they are for ethnic Georgians.

Benefits of Europeanization and ethnic minority communities in Georgia

During focus group discussions, participants were asked to identify any benefits of Georgia's relations with the EU and to what extent they personally or someone they knew could enjoy these benefits. Opinions were divided between those who could identify such available benefits and those who argued that there were no benefits minorities could enjoy. The following sections overview how minorities perceive such benefits as well as the reasons why some believed that there were none.

Focus group participants listed a range of potentially beneficial developments which have been achieved in the context of Georgia's Europeanization. These can be divided into four general categories: visa liberalization, politics and governance, economy and employment, and education and social issues.

Visa liberalization

Visa liberalization was one of the most recurring tangible achievements that research participants thought citizens of Georgia can enjoy. This is not surprising as during the first 16 months of visa-free regime, 255,429 citizens travelled visa-free to the EU (Netgazeti 2018) and by June 2019 the numbers had reached approximately 450,000 (Dolidze 2019). This is over 12 percent of the total population of Georgia. Therefore, even if a person has not yet enjoyed this opportunity, there is a high chance that they know someone who has. The problem with visa liberalization, however, is that it is often used or is perceived as a way to acquire usually illegal employment in the EU. As one 20-year-old male participant noted in Akhaltsikhe (22.05.2020),

Now people have an opportunity to go to Europe without a visa, get a job there, although illegally but still. It is also easier to get a work permit. I know many people who went to France, Germany and Poland and they work there without a problem. There are plenty of jobs there.

Consequently, the visa-free regime was one of the most frequently recurring responses during the discussions and is perceived as a great achievement which citizens of Georgia can enjoy.

Politics and governance

Some participants identified positive changes in politics and governance as another benefit of Georgia's Europeanization. This normally includes improved governance and better protection of human rights, specifically minority rights. It seems that reforms brought about as a result of Georgia's interactions with the EU are viewed positively, which "made the state [Georgia] improve public services because if it did not, it would have been problematically perceived in the context of the integration" with the EU (Male, 31, Dmanisi, 27.06.2020). Another participant from Ninotsminda (17.03.2020) also positively evaluated the reforms but noted that to see the full results 10-20 years need to pass.

As for the human rights dimension of improved governance, one participant in Gardabani (female, 35, 22.06.2020) emphasized:

For Georgia to become an EU member, some conditions must be met. One of the requirements is protection of ethnic minorities including Azerbaijanis and Armenians. Minorities should be integrated within society without assimilation. Their rights should be protected, rights of their cultural heritage, their native language, [and] cultural values [should be protected] – this is one of the requirements.

This theme recurred in Akhalkalaki, Marneuli and Ninotsminda as well. For example, one participant from Ninotsminda juxtaposed the broader European approach to protecting human rights to that of Russia. He recalled the deportations of Georgians from Russia in 2006 as well as the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) which requested compensations from Russia to the victims (see, *Georgia v Russia* 2009). Similarly, a female participant aged 28 from Marneuli stated that she would like to have European standards of human rights protection in Georgia. This indicates that some members of minority communities understand that human rights, including protection of minorities, is a part of the Europeanization agenda in Georgia.

Economy and employment

Another benefit of Georgia's Europeanization relates to the economy and employment. While this is a broad and complex area, participants understood its implications quite well. For example, the association agreement and the possibility to export Georgian products in the EU were mentioned as an opportunity for the country as a whole but it was also noted that Georgia does not fully utilize these opportunities. Even though some participants mentioned that farmers have undergone trainings in how to meet European standards for agricultural products. The discussions suggest the need to continue such trainings. It was also emphasized that meeting European standards of food production is beneficial not only for Georgia's relations with the EU but also for the improved quality of domestic food consumption.

One of the major problems for minorities is employment opportunities and it was a recurring idea that Europeanization could potentially contribute to a solution. According to

the participants of the research, this can happen in three main ways. First, some people use the current visa-free regime to illegally find work in the EU, but this was acknowledged to be sub-optimal. Second, grants that the EU and other international organizations provide has become a means of employment rather activism to promote certain value-driven agendas. And third, Georgia needs to learn from the European countries and their experience how to stimulate creation of new jobs. A female participant aged 23 from Gardabani (22.06.2020) noted:

If I wanted to start my business, there are some programs in Georgia that provide some assistance but getting these grants is difficult. As far as I know, there are such programs in Europe too and they help young people to start business or to expand your farming capacity and self-realize. It would be good if it was the same in Georgia.

As a result, sharing experiences and learning from European success stories was seen by participants as a way for Georgia to improve the job market and create opportunities for the youth.

Education and social issues

Finally, the last area of benefit from Europeanization is education and social issues. In this regard, participants overwhelmingly singled out educational opportunities that Erasmus+ scholarships provide for Georgian citizens. A 22-year-old male participants from Marneuli (29.02.2020) mentioned his brother studied in Italy with an Erasmus+ scholarship and he also used the opportunity to study for seven months, additionally his brother is active in various projects and travels throughout Europe as a result. Consequently, it is clear that the educational opportunities provided through Erasmus+ exchange programs are a highly valued benefit especially among the younger members of minority communities.

Furthermore, youth trainings and promoting educational standards were other areas in which Georgians, including minority community members, can benefit from Europeanization. In this regard, one male participant, 20, in Akhaltsikhe (22.05.2020) mentioned recognition of Georgian university diplomas in Europe as a significant achievement. A female, 21, from the same group agreed and emphasized that Georgian degree certificates even from vocational schools are accepted in Europe. She also noted that Georgia needs to learn from the EU how to promote youth engagement in social activities. Similarly, another female, 18, from Akhalkalaki (06.03.2020) emphasized the importance of youth trainings which receive funding from the EU:

I have participated in a lot of trainings that are funded by Europe and USA. In terms of developing education, this is a great help. Without such [a good relationship between Georgia and the EU], we would not have such assistance. We would not be able to study for free and now we can participate in a lot of projects funded by Europe.

Overall, the benefits identified by participants in the focus groups seem to be perceived as important achievements by minority communities, especially their younger members.

However, this is an optimistic account of how minorities see Georgia's Europeanization and its associated benefits. Some research participants, on the other hand, reported that they or least some members of their communities are deprived of opportunities to enjoy these benefits. Therefore, the following section overviews the reasons why research participants believe that there is no benefit to them or people like them in the context of Europeanization of Georgia.

Reasons why ethnic minorities cannot enjoy benefits of Europeanization

Participants of the research identified three primary barriers which prevent minority communities, especially for older generations, from enjoying the benefits of Europeanization. These include a lack of accessible information, language barriers, and disbelief in the idea that minorities can actually receive any benefits from Europeanization. The latter problem indicates a lack of awareness about Europeanization as a process which has a potential to provide tangible benefits.

Lack of information

A lack of information was mentioned in focus group discussions in all six towns as a barrier for minorities. However, it is also emblematic of deeper problems. The research suggests that two main factors result in the deficiency of information. The first factor is the settlement type, members of minority communities who live in or close to Tbilisi are better informed about Europeanization and have better opportunities to utilize the benefits of the Georgia-EU relationship than those who live in the regions. However, disparities are not exclusive to center-periphery differences. Even within minority-populated regions, people have less access to information if they live in rural areas as opposed to municipal centers. A female participant, 18, from Akhalkalaki (06.03.2020) mentioned, "even if to some extent people have access to information in the town [Akhalkalaki], in the villages nobody knows anything at all."

The second factor that results in a lack of information is related to the need for improved communication activities from various actors involved in Georgia's Europeanization. A male participant, 31, from Dmanisi (27.06.2020) argued that if ordinary people had more information about the opportunities the EU creates for citizens of Georgia, the "strive for Europe would not only be an official state policy but also an individual desire of a lot of people". This indicates is that minorities raise the issue of participatory agenda-setting when it comes to the Europeanization of Georgia. Local actors from minority communities need to have opportunities to "upload" their interests to the process of determining the political agenda of EU-Georgia relations. If the state authorities and civil society organizations manage to establish a mixture of top-down and bottom-up processes for Europeanization, there will be higher levels of societal resilience and consolidation. Otherwise, Europeanization is often perceived, as one respondent argued, "as foreign and externally imposed" on minority communities and beyond:

Often, donor support is such that they offer you priorities and you need to adjust but in the case of European integration, there is room for us to create the right agenda. However, we do not always see this. ... In an ideal scenario, ethnic minorities should probably also be contributing to the agenda-setting and the state should be putting sufficient effort in ensuring that this agenda is actually based on European values.

On the other hand, however, public officials interviewed over the course of this research tell about various mechanisms that the state uses to ensure minorities are informed. For example, a representative of the NATO and EU Information Center stated in an interview that the website of the Center will be translated into minority languages and information will be available in an accessible language for minorities.ⁱ At the same time, there are meetings organized in remote villages under a framework of informational campaigns. A representative of the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality maintained in an interview that

Representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture have conducted meetings and provided information [to minority communities] about various issues, including cooperatives, which resulted in great interest. So they are aware of what opportunities there are [in terms of projects offered by the EU].ⁱⁱ

Overall, there are two conflicting narratives about the government's communication efforts. Interviewed public officials claim that the government is putting a lot of effort into communication but members of minority communities still report accessibility of information as a major challenge. It is understandable that state institutions cannot reach each and every individual personally, but it seems that the target audience of these communication efforts is far from satisfied. Therefore, there is a need for improved communication, which is something the Government of Georgia has historically not done well at – a timely example being the failure of communication with ethnic minorities about the measures against, and the dangers of the coronavirus.

Language barriers

A lack of knowledge of the Georgian language is a barrier for members of ethnic minorities in a range of different contexts. Europeanization and accessing benefits associated with it is no exception in this regard. However, what is interesting is that often the issue related to the knowledge of the state language led to disagreements among the participants of the discussions. Some participants identified it as a challenge, while others, typically those who reported that they do know Georgian, argued that there is an easy solution to this problem. In 2005, Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration was established which was designed to train officials in local governments to increase their qualifications, including ethnic minorities who could also study the Georgian language (Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration 2020a). Currently, the School provides Georgian courses in ten centers across the three regions of Kakheti, Kvemo Kartli, and Samtskhe-Javakheti: Marneuli, Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Gardabani, Tsalka, Akhalkalaki, Ninotsminda, Lambalo, Lagodekhi, and Akhmeta (Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration 2020b). Additionally, the School has mobile groups that provide courses outside these municipal

centers in various villages (Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration 2020b). This is a great opportunity for members of minority communities as the courses are completely free of charge. Therefore, one participant from Akhalkalaki, female, 26 (06.03.2020) stated, “There is [a] Zhvania school and I go there to learn [Georgian], I am very satisfied. ... If people have the interest, everyone can do it.” Similarly, this position was upheld by the representative of the Ministry of Reconciliation who stated in an interview that increasing numbers of minorities are joining these courses.ⁱⁱⁱ

Overall, the Zhvania Schools are a rare opportunity for ethnic minorities in Georgia to learn the state language. However, another problem in terms of teaching and learning Georgian is that schoolchildren are unable to acquire the necessary language skills in public schools. The quality of teaching the state language is very low in schools and this remains a challenge for the state. Relying on Zhvania Schools and leaving it to an individual to choose whether to seek out opportunities to learn the state language is not the most efficient policy if Georgia wants all its citizens to know the state language. Poor quality of teaching Georgian at schools, due to the lack of human resources, especially in rural areas, was a recurring problem identified by research participants across all discussions. This means that a person graduating from high school may not have a sufficient level of state language skills and must find other ways to acquire the language knowledge. This should not be necessary and improving the quality of Georgian language instruction at public schools should be a high priority for language policy.

Disbelief in benefits of Europeanization

The final barrier which was identified by research participants is perceptual. Some members of minority communities do not believe that there are any benefits to Europeanization or that benefits can be accessed by minorities. According to a female participant from Akhalkalaki, 18 (06.03.2020), “people do not believe [that there are benefits associated with Europeanization]. Even when you tell them that there are such and such opportunities, they just do not believe it... Especially the older generation.” Similarly, others do not recognize the opportunities or misperceive them and get scared, as a 31-year-old male participant in Dmanisi (27.06.2020) put it:

If they [ethnic Azerbaijanis] take their agricultural products to Europe, how are they going to sell it? They are scared, [and] do not want to do it. Therefore, [the] Russian market is more comfortable and familiar for them because Russia does not have any standards – it is more acceptable. So, to sum up, we think locally and do not want to get involved in competition.

Yet another misperception which was especially present in Ninotsminda, was that even if there are benefits of Europeanization, they are not for ethnic minorities and are exclusively available for ethnic Georgians, or those who live in Tbilisi. Male participants in Ninotsminda (17.03.2020) claimed that “visa liberalization is for [ethnic] Georgians. They go to Europe; we cannot afford it anyway” and that “they [the EU] help the center [Tbilisi] only. As for the visa, you cannot benefit from it if you want to go for work.” Consequently,

these beliefs and conceptions are predispositions which challenge the effectiveness of communication efforts undertaken by state authorities and civil society organizations.

Conclusion and recommendations

Ethnic minorities in Georgia who live in compact settlements in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti are in many ways similar to ethnic Georgians living in small towns and rural areas. Possibly the primary difference that sets minorities apart is the lack of knowledge of the state language, which results in inability to access relevant information or enjoy public services to the extent of ethnic Georgians. Other factors such as disbelief or misperceptions about Europeanization are not minority specific. If ethnic minorities feel that the benefits of Europeanization are only available to ethnic Georgians and those living in Tbilisi, rural population of ethnic Georgians could easily argue that these benefits are exclusive to the wealthiest members of the Georgian society and the people living in the capital. If the self-other nexus in suppressed-privileged categories for ethnic minorities is an ethnic identity, for Georgians it would be social class. However, this understanding of the self-other nexus in the categories of suppressed as opposed to privileged parts of the society is largely the same. The primary solution to this challenge is applicable to the whole of Georgia, participatory agenda setting, can only happen through promoting bottom-up Europeanization based on European values.

This paper proposes the following recommendations to contribute to the elimination of barriers which prevent ethnic minority communities from enjoying the benefits of Georgia's Europeanization process.

To the Government of Georgia

- **Ensure participation of ethnic minorities (and other local actors from other regions of Georgia) in the process of agenda-setting in the context of Europeanization to promote bottom-up processes and increased ownership of minorities over the foreign policy agenda of the country** – It is important for ethnic minorities to be not only beneficiaries of certain policies or projects but also active participants often giving direction to the development of various processes that concern them. This way Europeanization will not seem to be externally and forcibly imposed over Georgia.
- **Intensify communication regarding the availability of free Georgian language courses even in the comfort of one's own village through the mobile classes of Zurab Zhvania Schools** – research suggests that ethnic minorities understand it is important to know the state language because they feel those who do not speak Georgian cannot easily access the same public services, let alone the benefits of Europeanization, as those who speak Georgian. However, not everyone is aware of this opportunity.

- **Improve quality of teaching Georgian at public schools** – members of ethnic minorities should have an opportunity to learn the state language at the public school. Although Zurab Zhvania Schools are an important and effective initiative, it is of greater significance to ensure that Zurab Zhvania Schools are not the primary option for those members of minorities that wish to learn Georgian. Research suggests that the program of sending Georgian native speakers as teachers was one way to improve the quality of teaching Georgian as long as these teachers do not make local teachers feel redundant or insecure about their jobs.
- **Continue and increase the efforts dedicated to raising awareness of ethnic minorities (and rural population at large) regarding available tangible and intangible benefits resulting from Georgia’s Europeanization** – The research suggests that the government of Georgia has already been undertaking intensive communication activities to deliver information about the opportunities stemming from EU-Georgia relations. However, the fact that members of minority communities report a lack of information regarding these benefits and opportunities is indicative of the need for improved efforts. It is understandable that reorienting local producers from Russian to EU market will take a long time, however, it is important to reach wider audiences especially outside the municipal centers even in remote villages.

To Civil Society Organizations working on issues of ethnicity and minorities

- **Rely on local young people who already have a relatively higher degree of awareness as agents of change** – The EU Delegation and the NATO EU Information Center have been implementing a project of Young European Ambassadors. A similar model can be used in exclusively minority-populated areas so that young generation of minorities who speak Georgian and English and are active members of the society have the means to contribute to the political education of older generations or their own peers regarding Georgia’s Europeanization.
- **Adopt a participatory approach when implementing projects about Europeanization in order to avoid encouraging perception of donor-funded projects as externally imposed political agenda** – in general, NGOs do not enjoy high degree of public trust in Georgia. When it comes to imposing values forcibly, those who were targeted as beneficiaries may be alienated completely. Therefore, it is important that CSOs do not go to minority-populated areas with pre-defined agenda of trainings and workshops but let the members of local communities direct the process of agenda-setting.
- **Conduct informational campaigns on issues that are of interest for minority communities** – it is important that those who plan informational campaigns understand what issues are of interest to a specific minority community, e.g. Kvemo

Kartli as opposed to Kakheti or Samtskhe-Javakheti, or even within each region in terms of municipalities. These communities tend to be different from each other with different needs and interests. Therefore, such campaigns should be audience-oriented as much as possible without one-size-fits-all approaches.

To European Union representatives and the international community

- **Ensure that rule transfer is not just a formality but also an integral part of socialization with norms** - If the EU is interested in successful rule transfer in Georgia, the focus should be on qualitative evaluations of whether the adopted formal rules are implemented.
- **Ensure an increased bottom-up process of political agenda-setting in the framework of EU-Georgia relations** - Increasing involvement of local actors, especially ethnic minorities who happen to be some of the most Eurosceptic members of the Georgian society, will raise the sense of ownership among local communities about Georgia's Europeanization. Although it is understandable that an entirely bottom-up process is neither possible nor desirable, keeping a fine balance is important for local communities not to perceive top-down Europeanization as externally imposed.

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- ⁱ Information Center on NATO and the EU, personal communication, 19 May 2020.
- ⁱⁱ Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality of Georgia, personal communication, 20 May 2020.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality of Georgia, personal communication, 20 May 2020.

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Appendix

A list of interviews conducted in the framework of the research

1. Council on Ethnic Minorities under the auspices of Public Defender`s Office, personal communication, 19 May 2020.
2. European Delegation in Georgia, personal communicaiton, 19 May 2020.
3. Information Center on NATO and the EU, personal communication, 19 May 2020.
4. Public Defender`s Office, personal communication, 19 May 2020.
5. Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality of Georgia, personal communication, 20 May 2020.
6. Center for the Studies of Ethnicity and Multiculturalism, personal communication, 21 May 2020.
7. Information Center on NATO and the EU, personal communication, 22 May 2020.
8. Javakheti local NGO, personal communication, 9 June 2020.
9. Ifact media source, personal communication, 20 June 2020.
10. Javakheti local NGO, personal communication, 21 June 2020.
11. Kvemo Kartli local NGO, personal communication, 21 June 2020.
12. Javakheti local government, personal communication, 24 June 2020.

A list of focus group discussions conducted in the framework of the research

Samtskhe-Javakheti:

1. Akhalkalaki, women, 9 participants, 6 March 2020
2. Ninotsminda, men, 10 participants, 17 March 2020
3. Akhaltsikhe, mixed, 6 participants, 22 May 2020

Kvemo Kartli:

1. Marneuli, mixed, 7 participants, 29 February 2020
2. Gardabani, women, 4 participants, 22 June 2020
3. Dmanisi, men, 4 participants, 27 June 202