

## Shaping Secure Education Policy: Challenges of Multiculturalism in Georgia

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### Abstract

*Equality and multiculturalism in education are the most crucial problems in democratic countries. Georgia, a multinational country, faces number of challenges offered by democratization and globalization. The results of these processes are to be measured in the long run for society as a whole, but the disruptions come immediately for some individuals or group of individuals who acknowledge the harm they get from the change. A certain mismatch between the long-term opportunities and rapid changes demanded by globalization often triggers unreasonable compromises in politics and social spheres. The present article deals with one of the most complicated issues of today - developing prudent national education policy which will best suit to the needs of multinational country like Georgia at the same time, it will secure country's political stability, integrity, and guarantee its independent, sustainable development. In shaping education policy Georgian Government has to deal with the problem of existence of minority language instruction schools (Russian, Armenian, Azeri), particularly in the regions where national minorities reside.*

Multiculturalism in education is one of the most crucial problems in democratic countries. Georgia is a multinational country and its school system should respond to the needs of wide diversity of cultural, ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic groups. The present article deals with one of the most complicated issues of today – development of prudent national education policy which will best suit to its present needs; at the same time, the policy should secure country's political stability and sustainable development. In shaping education policy Georgian Government has to deal with a number of problems, among them:

- Providing equal opportunities for the national minority high school graduates in terms of further education access and employment;
- Implementing Georgian National Curriculum in minority schools;
- Offering multicultural education for culturally pluralistic schools;
- Enhancing quality of teaching in schools of national minorities and improving teaching of Georgian language;
- Ensuring the process of integration and socialization of minorities in the mainstream culture.

The above stated problems should be effectively responded by the Georgian government in the shortest period of time. The existed situation calls for grass root changes in education policy of Georgia.

The problem of education of national minorities should be considered in connection with the issues it is closely associated with, such as, historical development of the country, current demands of European Union, security of the country, human rights, education equity, and other. Considering the significance of the problem,



we hope to motivate and provoke a wide circle of scientists and education specialists to get involved in discussion around the problem. A comprehensive study of the problem will endorse working out a rational and reasonable attitude towards the issue under consideration. The present paper addresses existed problems in minority education, gives a historical brief overview of the problem, and makes an attempt to suggest multicultural secondary education model for Georgian schools of ethnic minorities which will be in accordance with the basic liberal values of the western society. It will support the unity, integrity and further democratic development of the country and ensure equal education and personal advancement opportunity to each individual regardless of race and ethnicity.

Georgia, a multinational country, nowadays faces a number of challenges in the result of crucial processes, such as democratization, globalization, a shift to western political and socio-cultural values, a change of lingua franca – from Russian to English, and other. A certain mismatch between the long-term opportunities and rapid changes demanded by Georgian reality and globalization often trigger unreasonable compromises in politics. Multiethnic society seems to be even more vulnerable to political, social and economic changes. State education policy towards minorities in particular should be exclusively prudent so that it should guarantee country's independent and sustainable development.

More than thirty nationalities have enjoyed peaceful coexistence on the territory of Georgia for centuries developing common culture and traditions. Heavy nationalism has always been alien to Georgian people, and yet it had to encounter solemn problems in the recent historical past. The roots of the problems can be found in the Soviet ethnic policy which was controversial and bore a dual character: on the one hand it claimed to be based on equality, granting to the nations the right of self-determination, but on the other hand, it originated potentially conflicting zones on the territories of the republics. So called “brother republics” played their roles under close supervision of an “elder brother” – Russia. USSR ethnic policy served as a powerful weapon in the hands of soviet regime to keep under control political unity of the country. Soviet policy gave right to minorities to have communication, education and broadcasting network in the languages of minorities, or in case they chose so, in Russian. In the result, independent Georgia inherited ethnic population groups in compact settlements talking their native languages, and state secondary schools using national minority languages, or both – Russian and native as the language of instruction. Manifestation of the above-mentioned policies today is a concentration of national minorities, particularly Azeris (6,5%) and Armenians (5,7%) along the borders with their kin states (Armenians in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Azeris in Kvemo Kartli). Azeris make up to 83% of the population in Marneuli district and over 66% in both Bolnisi and Dmanisi. Armenians make up 94% and 95% of the population in the districts of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda respectively. This raises the problem of Georgia's territorial integrity, a subject of great concern. The remaining 4% of national minorities is made up of smaller groups, including Abkhaz, Ossetians, Russians, Ukrainians, Kurds/ Yezids, Greeks, etc. (Transparency International Georgia, 2007).

During Eduard Shevardnadze's presidency (1995-2003), the state policy toward national minorities actually was not changed. Governed by the local authorities who were loyal to the president Shevardnadze the minorities' problems remained unchanged; consequently, they have become more complicated. Minority schools continued education process in their native languages, and those who wish to continue with higher education could enter the Georgian universities - Russian language department, or went abroad, mostly to kin states and Russia to continue education in the Universities. So, one of the reasons why national minorities have been leaving the country was (and remains till present) poor knowledge of Georgian language which is an obstacle for national minority school graduates to continue education in Georgian universities.

The situation changed when Mikheil Saakashvili became the president in 2003 and new government was formed. Civic nationalism has become a dominant policy, and consequently more interest has been allotted to the problems of minorities. It has been declared many times that the minorities should be incorporated in the mainstream culture without losing their national identity. The Office on Civil Integration

was created alongside with other specialized institutions dealing with minority problems. Insufficiency of Georgian language teachers, and consequently poor knowledge of Georgian language among the students, the quality of education in minority-language-instruction schools and significant differences in the school curriculum still remain as one of the major obstacles to their integration into Georgian society. At present, Russian, Azeri and Armenian secondary schools use their national languages, or both – Russian and native as the language of instruction; moreover, the text-books are mostly received from their kin states. The existing situation is certainly a challenge for national education system, and country's national security as well. Minorities feel alienated from mainstream culture because of absence of common language. Russian language has been largely replaced by English, as a second language, referred by the Ministry of Education of Georgia as “Language Revolution”, in April 2011. Empirical research should investigate how these processes affect both: minorities and Georgians who are now experiencing a loss of Russian language which used to be a common language - Lingua Franca- during the last century.

For the last decade Georgian Government has been struggling to overcome Soviet inheritance both in the system and in mentality and to find its own way for effective change of education system in order to be in line with the countries it ultimately sees its future with. “Georgia has recognized the international principles and best practices regarding the policy towards national minorities and the need for their integration. The country is a signatory to the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) and takes note of most international instruments and recommendations on the subject of minority rights. However, the country has not ratified other important conventions, notably the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. Taking note of the fact that effective protection of rights of minorities at times substantially differs from the general protection of human rights, the EU-Georgia ENP Action Plan specifically addresses this issue. Chapter 4.1.1 calls on Georgia to “ensure respect for rights of persons belonging to national minorities; to sign and ratify European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages” and “develop and implement a civic integration strategy, including creation of appropriate monitoring instruments.” In spite of these international commitments, the government has not addressed the issue in a coherent and consistent manner..... because the commitment of ratifying and enforcing the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages is largely seen as a threat to national unity and is dismissed both by the government and opposition representatives alike” (Transparency International Georgia, 2007). Today, integration of national minorities in the mainstream and ending mutual isolation is the country's top priority.

Education reform initiated by Saakashvili's government started with the introduction of the new Unified National Exam (UNE) for university admission to combat corruption deeply rooted in this sphere. One of the requirements of Universal National Exams for university admission is that a student has to pass an exam in Georgian language, which often appears another barrier for majority of the national minority students who wish to continue education in universities. Georgian language is obligatory for minority language schools, but teaching practices do not meet national standards. Though there has been many arguments regarding the discriminatory nature of the Georgian language test for national minorities, The Ministry of Education and Science refuses either to change its policy, or implement any positive discrimination towards minorities. The only option for the national minority students is to get private tutors not only in Georgian language, but now also in other school subjects as well to pass National Exams for Secondary School Attestation. On the one hand, the rights of minorities have been violated, but on the other hand, the present policy, which is in the process of development, ultimately leads to their further integration into the mainstream ensuring equal rights for them.

Another factor that impedes minority access to higher educational institutions is that practically Russian language departments have been eliminated from Georgian university departments. Only few colleges like Institute of Aviation in Tbilisi, Marine Institute in Batumi have Russian programs. Therefore, a student's choice is limited to the institutions which offer courses in English; but those are mainly private institutions and tuition fee is much higher than in the state ones. In the interview with the head of NGO “National Minorities'



Parents Organization”, a disappointment regarding their children's integration and equal opportunities has been clearly stated.

The issue under consideration also incorporates the principles of equal opportunities and human rights. Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia is responsible for providing equal education opportunities for the citizens of the country regardless of their ethnicity, gender, social status. Recently, a revamped National Curricula has been worked out by the Ministry and will be step by step implemented across the country, though; national minority schools face even more serious problems in this process because their curriculum and the contents of the social science courses particularly are mostly focused on the kin state rather than Georgia. A site visit to Tbilisi state school # 43 revealed many interesting facts. They receive the text-books either via Russian Embassy (before 2008), or use old soviet period text-books, particularly in math and science. Simon Janashia, professor at Ilia University, asserts that teaching of any subject on national minority language is not adequate and the state reforms regarding text-books and teaching methodology totally avoids those schools. Some text-books in math, history and other subjects have been translated from Georgian language, moreover a few text-books have been offered in two languages which stand beyond any criticism. There is a significant difference in the contents between Russian, Armenian, Azeri and Georgian text –books, they are largely simplified and ultimately do not meet GNE or school attestation state exam requirements. In public schools there is also a tendency to discriminate students according to their knowledge of Georgian language, and in the result, within one school walls students are assigned to different classes – Georgian and non-Georgian and are offered different curriculum, quality of teaching and Georgian language learning opportunities.

Evidently, a series of changes should take place from both – state bodies and national minority school administration to promote integration of minorities into the mainstream culture.

Education is a vast topic and it encompasses the population of all ages. The lack of Georgian language knowledge affects citizens of different age groups who try to have career promotion, get integrated into the mainstream culture, and establish intercultural relationships. In the result, Armenian and Azeri are largely used instead of Georgian as the working language even in government institutions. It has long been evident that different programs which would promote socialization of the young population from minority populated regions would be implemented. A number of such projects, including Georgian language training programs, inter-group socialization, Georgian teachers training programs, Georgian Public Broadcasting news program in five minority languages, and some other ones have been initiated by the government for the last decade. These initiatives aim at strengthening human interaction to a certain extent, but certainly they only succeeded to address particular problems, but not the global ones. Besides, it should be taken into consideration that to achieve genuine integration of national minorities, Georgian language teaching enhancement, or Georgian culture implementation processes alone won't meet this end, instead, it is necessary to think how to attain a two way effective communication, how to support minority culture, encourage minority languages preservation, develop respect and interest towards minority culture. The most effective way to implement the abovementioned is through secondary multicultural education.

Inequality in education, a rather controversial political and socioeconomic issue, is hotly debated by both – government and people in Georgia. Disparity in educational opportunities between different social groups affects sustainable development of the country and is a main impetus to creating free, knowledgeable civic society which will give new dimensions to building democracy in the country. Free Internet access and multiple education software programs now play the most powerful role in achieving equity in education. Existing socio-economic differences among classes are reflected in the quality of school education. National minorities and lower class population suffer even more in the twenty-first century from social disparity and educational inequity. While the government claims that allowing equal opportunities for all, it does not provide the older generation, which is already disadvantaged by the old system, adequate resources to catch up with

the majority population and compete on equal ground. It should be noted that they are parents of a young generation and are supposed to play a very significant role in the upbringing of their children. The starting conditions may be better now for the generation of national minorities that is just now starting school, but those caught in between, i.e. those already in the upper grades of public school, young adults, and older people remain deprived. Unfortunately, the latter group constitutes the majority of the national minority population. (Transparency International Georgia, 2007)

Time-proven international practice of minorities' integration into the mainstream culture is through and/or bilingual education. In many countries, and particularly in the USA, multicultural education appears to be the most constructive and positive way of addressing the problem of multiculturalism effectively. The US rich experience should be shared, and the models which are so popular in America today could be successfully targeted to the present needs of Georgia. The problem of multiculturalism has been addressed in different ways in different countries, some very successful approaches are: dual language instruction, transitional programs, immersion programs, multicultural curriculum, and other. So far, the Ministry of Education has made some ineffective attempts to introduce bilingual text-books, severely criticized by the teachers and parents alike. A few years ago twenty bilingual classes were operating in Kvemo Kartli. “This experiment was started at the schools' own initiative<sup>1</sup> and the Ministry so far has no intention to extend this experience nationwide or contribute to its implementation in interested schools.” (Transparency International Georgia, 2007).

Today government programs address social needs and primarily allocate resources to deal with inequalities that arise from class, status, and ethnic differences. It has both – political and financial resources for social redistribution. Providing equal education opportunities is an indispensable part of sustainable democratic development. Integration of Georgia in European Union is one of the main destinations for our country. But this aim will not be achieved unless we meet the demands put forward by international community. Currently, the government is planning to introduce crucial changes in secondary education policies of minorities, for example, enhance Georgian language teaching, and implement new National Curriculum in order to meet EU requirements.

Will the present policy promote, for example, multicultural studies, or will it enhance Georgian language curriculum in minority schools? It is obvious that the new education policy is destined to implement rather crucial changes in all directions, and particularly in education of minorities. In the result of my observation I have identified that a new policy is more pro “integration” than in favor of multiculturalism, which, as an ideology has been disregarded lately by many countries, including the UK, as well as by many education specialists.

Considering present political situation in the country, I would support multicultural education model for the nearest foreseen future; though, my idea about further development of Georgian education policy for national minorities definitely differs from ideology of multiculturalism as a political ideology. The term “minority” itself literally means that you do not belong to a larger, stronger, dominant group, which in that particular country defines the policy and dictates the rules. I have been observing and studying the minorities' attitude, particularly of adults, regarding their nationality, language of education, and have come to the conclusion that young generation strives to achieve equality in all spheres. They definitely try to join and become an organic part of the dominant culture. I hope the Government will do its best to change the situation; and this change starts from school. Mainstream culture is becoming more attractive from many perspectives for minority adults, and consequently, I hope that a new ideology of minority's integration will gain strong support in the next decades among wide society. This tendency also well suits to the globalization process, which like “natural disasters” seems inevitable, but still less vulnerable in case prudent crisis management policies are worked out.

The model I am going to offer for consideration is a combination of already proven practices world-



wide, but still it should be adopted and targeted to the local environment. In grades 1-6 the education should be bilingual, in grades 7-9 social sciences text-books, especially in history and geography of Georgia, also Georgian language and literature text-books should be the same in terms of contents as it is in other Georgian state schools. On this stage the school board, teacher-parents association should play important role. And a high school program school education should be offered in Georgian language. To implement this policy it is necessary that the Government support it by offering training programs, stimulating teachers to study both languages and have training in bilingual and multicultural class teaching, youth socializing projects, and others.

Complex study of the problem will give due assessment to current situation, reveal negative aspects of minority language schools, and draw a line between false understanding of tolerance and real care for the well-being of each citizen of Georgia. Introduction of new curriculum is not an only solution to the existed problem. The government should be focused on multicultural education perspectives, promotion of dual language instruction in the elementary and secondary schools, and would probably support Georgian language instruction in high school. It is also necessary to change school infrastructure and management strategy to achieve the goal, e.g. school boards should be created in the minority schools, also teacher-parent associations should play a significant role in the process. We make a particular emphasis on the necessity for having cultural diversity among the administration, faculty, and minority school personnel that reflects the composition of the school and community. To achieve this end it is necessary to make this communication a two-way. Active involvement of the minorities in the government projects, special training programs offered to the local population, parents and teachers support to school reforms are necessary.

President of Georgia often refers to the problem of multiculturalism. Georgia is a place where interests of multiethnic society interact, enriching each-other and living in peace. I had meetings with minority community representatives who gave an interesting insight into the problem. Azeri community leaders assert that different nationalities leaving side by side enrich each-others cultures. Traditions which do not respond to a new century demands die out, and only those which are in line with progress, human rights, moral and ethical norms will survive. Jewish Diaspora members say that Jewish people's assimilation with Georgians has always been a very exceptional phenomenon. Jewish people never felt alien in Georgia, even picked an accent of the region where they reside, and Jewish language was predominantly religious language for these people.

While working on the above-mentioned issues in Georgia for a period of time I have faced a number of problems: a. Lack of resources; b. Deficiency of experts who are competent in the field and would contribute significantly to its revision; c. lack of reliable study results and recent statistics. To fill his gap, I consider it reasonable to develop a new study-course in multicultural education at our newly established department of Pedagogy and English Language Teaching, International Black Sea University. The aim of the course is to investigate the nature of multiculturalism with particular emphasis on examining contemporary standards and institutions for protecting the rights of persons belonging to national minorities. The course will also study multicultural education models practiced in different countries, particularly in the USA, European Union, and Israel. The course will give attention to the ethno-linguistic, social, economic, and political nuances of nations and will be in accordance with the basic liberal values. The university course will built a solid basis for further studies in multicultural education; also, it is the best way to disseminate the outcomes of the scientific approaches round the issue carried out by the university scholars and the students. Being a member of IBSU staff I am actively involved in curriculum development process. In order to respond effectively to the needs of Georgian education system we should develop university curriculum in education, offer new study courses and training programs, invite professional experts and create resource center.

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