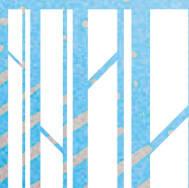


# **CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE STATE STRATEGY FOR CIVIC EQUALITY AND INTEGRATION**



SOCIAL  
JUSTICE  
CENTER



## Introduction

On July 13, 2021, the Georgian Government approved the State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration. Although the document covers a ten years period, it does not contain substantially new or crucial perspectives in terms of legislative, institutional and political changes that would contribute to a more equal and equitable political and social environment for non-dominant ethnic groups. The document essentially maintains the inertia experienced in previous years and does not consider any new special, positive measures that would increase involvement, participation and access for non-dominant ethnic groups in any of its key strategic elements.

The strategy covers a period of ten years, and covers 5 strategic elements of an integration policy: 1. The use of the state language in support of integration; 2. Access to quality education; 3. Equality in civic and political participation; 4. Social and economic integration; 5. Intercultural dialogue. According to the government, the process of learning the state language by ethnic minorities will become an important axis of its integration policy, which is why it is to be its top priority.

It is important that, with the new strategy, the government plans to strengthen support for ethnic minority education at the pre-school, school and vocational education levels and continues to support the 1+4 program. It is also worth appreciating that the government recognizes the importance of supporting young people and ensuring their participation. However, the means of implementing these strategies, which have been declared a priority by the state, are still presented in a very general form in the document, which does not allow for proper evaluation. Among other things, in the area of the education policy, which is the main priority of the strategy, the document mentions the idea of developing a unified policy in the future and does not specify new approaches beyond outsourcing existing programs in ethnic minority schools, training teachers and creating the necessary infrastructure and teaching resources. Due to such declarative and unspecific content, the results achieved by the document are not predictable. When viewed in the light of many previous years of government work on integration policy, such an approach seems even more problematic.

### The important role of the state language in integration and access to quality education

The priorities, goals and objectives of any strategic document are based on an analysis of the current situation and context. Therefore, an in-depth assessment of the State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration document would not have been possible without an assessment of the most comprehensive and one of the most important parts of this document, the third chapter, which provides an in-depth and detailed overview of the country in terms of civic equality and integration. It can be said that this part of the document contains the main findings and data on which all five strategic priorities, goals and objectives are founded. This part, at first

glance, leaves the reader with the impression that the authors of the strategy document and the government agencies are aware of the current situation. At the same time, the language and sentiment of this part of the document differ significantly from the public positioning of state agencies and are closer to the positions of members of the civil sector, including activists and members of non-dominant ethnic groups.

However, the main shortcoming of the third chapter of the document is its failure to see the fundamental causes of the existing problems, challenges and difficulties. The third chapter describes in detail that (1) “In non-dominant ethnic groups, the inclusion of children in preschool is only 25.5 % (while in Georgia the average is 69.5 %)”; (2) “More than 62.7% of teachers employed in non-Georgian language schools hold the status of practicing teacher and only 24% hold the status of senior teacher”; (3) “The content of native language textbooks for students belonging to ethnic minorities imported from neighboring countries inhibits them from identifying with Georgia as their own state, and creates a feeling of ambiguity”; (4) “University graduation rates in non-dominant ethnic groups are particularly low, at around 30%”.

Even these data taken alone are enough for the authors of the document to recognize the systemic failures of the education policy<sup>1</sup> and the need for special policies, mechanisms and reforms, and to start discussing the need for changes in the existing situation. However, instead of pointing to the need for such a systemic change, the document focuses on strengthening the teaching of the Georgian language and the importance of existing programs (e.g., The Georgian Language Centers of the Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration, etc.). According to one of the studies named in the document (National Center for Assessment and Examinations, “State Assessment - Georgian as a Second Language”, 2019), “Most students of non-Georgian schools want to learn the state language, and most of the parents believe that fluency in the Georgian language will help their children in the process of employment and integration”. This part of the document does not evaluate critically the existing programs and projects, the main concern of which is teaching the language to ethnic groups.

As a result, we may conclude that neither of the strategic priorities, on the one hand support for state language integration and on the other hand access to quality education, base their goals and objectives on the in-depth causes and challenges that this document pretends to address. Moreover, the evaluation of the Strategy Action Plan shows that at the level of specific activities, except for the transformed language of the Strategy Document, no major innovations are planned, and the activities of this strategy fail to go beyond the information campaigns, meetings and Georgian language courses at Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration.

### Equality, civic and political participation

---

<sup>1</sup> *Systemic Challenges of Education Policy for Ethnic Minorities*, The Social Justice Center, 2020, available at: <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/etnikuri-umtsiresobebis-mimart-ganatilebis-politikis-sistemuri-gamotsvevebi>

One of the crucial aims of the integration policy is to strengthen the political representation and participation of ethnic minorities in public life. The strategy document recognizes that the representation of ethnic minorities is drastically low, not only in parliament but also in local self-government bodies. The number of ethnic minorities in parliament has dropped dramatically to a mere 6 MPs since the 2020 elections. In 2016, there were 11, and in 2012, 8. In 2017, when the percentage of MPs from ethnic minorities in parliament was the highest in recent years (7.3%), it was even then equivalent to a little over half the percentage of ethnic minorities among the general population (13.2 %). According to the CSEM survey, following the local self-government elections of 2016, the representation of ethnic minorities in local self-government was significantly reduced in 8 municipalities densely populated by ethnic minorities (Gardabani, Marneuli, Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Tsalka, Akhalkalaki, Akhaltsikhe, Ninotsminda. In these municipalities, on average, 779 ethnic Georgians have one representative on the City Council, while 1,116 ethnic Armenians and 2,945 ethnic Azeris each have one representative on the City Council.<sup>2</sup>

**Nevertheless, there are no special, positive mechanisms in our legal and political system<sup>3</sup> (for example, encouraging parties to increase the number of ethnic minorities in their ranks through funding, or via a quota model) that would increase the representation and involvement of ethnic minorities in elected bodies. Unfortunately, the new strategy document does not contain any proposals for special mechanisms and approaches to promote the political representation and participation of ethnic minorities and leaves this issue unaddressed and without response.<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the issue of the political participation of ethnic minorities has been critically raised by many international bodies (including the FCNM, OSCE, UPR).**

**The document also says nothing about the idea of establishing regular, democratic and inclusive consultation mechanisms for ethnic minorities at the parliamentary and governmental levels, which is an important lever for minorities to participate in political processes and to influence decisions.<sup>5</sup>**

The strategy speaks only about strengthening the consulting platforms already established at the governor's level and also about the importance of creating such forums at the level of self-

---

<sup>2</sup> Competition for Ethnic Minority Votes in Georgia: 2017 Local Elections Policy Essay, Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Multiculturalism (CSEM), 2018, available at: [http://csem.ge/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Competing-for-Votes-of-Ethnic-Minorities\\_Geo.pdf](http://csem.ge/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Competing-for-Votes-of-Ethnic-Minorities_Geo.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Positive Mechanisms to Support Minority Political Participation - International Experience Review, The Social Justice Center, 2020, available at: <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/pozituri-mekanizmebi-umtsiresobebis-politikuri-monatsileobis-mkhardasacherad-saertashoriso-gamotsdilebis-mimokhilva>

<sup>4</sup> According to the initial assessment of the Social Justice Center, following the local self-government elections in 2021, the number of ethnic minorities in the councils may increase. However, this change will not eliminate the insufficient representation and imbalance in the regions populated by minorities.

<sup>5</sup> *Ethnic Minority Consultation Mechanisms - Reality in Georgia and International Experience*, The Social Justice Center, 2020, available at: <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/etnikuri-umtsiresobebis-sakonsultatsio-mekanizmebi-realoba-sakartveloshi-da-saertashoriso-gamotsdileba>



government. At a time when decentralization in our political system is drastically weak, and political life on the ground is passive and less democratic, the creation of advisory mechanisms at the local level alone will not substantially strengthen the political involvement of minorities. Moreover, it is important that we see the political participation of ethnic minorities not only in the context of “issues related to them”, but also acknowledge the importance of minority participation in common state processes. It should also be noted that the strategy hardly touches upon the question of working with political parties or of the encouragement of the creation of formal opportunities for ethnic minorities to participate in the systems of those parties, and to express their particular needs.

The employment of ethnic minorities in public service is seriously inadequate and, among other factors, is one of the structural causes of the local communities distrust in, and alienation from, state institutions. A 2016 survey conducted by Green Caucasus in Kvemo Kartli<sup>6</sup> found that ethnic minorities make up only 17% of the civil servants in the municipalities of the region, while non-dominant ethnic groups make up 49% of the population living in these municipalities. The biggest disproportion is manifested in Marneuli and Bolnisi municipalities. According to the information requested from the local self-government bodies in the summer of 2021,

The total number of employees in **Marneuli Municipality** is 232, of which 84 are representatives of ethnic minorities. Most of them are representatives of the administrative unit and specialists (55 employees in total). In other words, only 36% of the employees are ethnic minorities, while in Marneuli municipality the total number of ethnic minorities constitute 91.4% of the population, and the largest group are Georgian Azerbaijanis (83.8%).

The total number of employees in **Bolnisi Municipality** is 190. 27 of them are representatives of ethnic minorities. Most of them are representatives of the administrative unit (16 employees). In other words, only 14% of the employees are ethnic minorities, while 69.1% of Bolnisi municipality are ethnic minorities, and the largest group are Georgian Azerbaijanis (63.4%).

The total number of civil servants in **Dmanisi Municipality** is 107, of which 23 are ethnic minorities. Most of them are representatives of the administrative unit and specialists (21 employees in total). Only 21.5% of the employees are ethnic minorities, while 66.9% of Dmanisi municipality are ethnic minorities, and the largest group are Georgian Azerbaijanis (65.5%).

---

<sup>6</sup> Ethnic Minorities in Kvemo Kartli Municipal Bodies, Green Caucasus, 2016, available at: <http://www.ivote.ge/GREENCAUCASUS/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Minorities-in-Kvemo-Kartli-Municipal-Administrations-research-presentation-16092016.pdf>

The total number of employees in **Tsalka Municipality** is 45, of which 10 are representatives of ethnic minorities. Most of them are representatives of the administrative unit and specialists. In other words, only 22% of the employees are ethnic minorities, while 53.5% of Tsalka municipality are ethnic minorities, and the largest group are Georgian Azerbaijanis.

Most of the employees in Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda municipalities are local ethnic Armenians.

Most of the state ministries do not keep a record of the statistics on the ethnicity of employees and it is difficult to assess the real situation.

**Despite the drastically low and asymmetric employment of ethnic minorities in the public service, the strategy paper does not include any proposals for specific measures<sup>7</sup> that would increase the employment of ethnic minorities in the public service (e.g. the adaptation of the criteria for the state language requirement, the development of targeted staff in distinct areas, the coordination and prioritization of employment and education, and the introduction of effective anti-discrimination mechanisms in the public service). An internship program coordinated by the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality can hardly be seen as a means of reversing the existing, unjust reality.**

Language policy creates a significant barrier for ethnic minorities wishing to communicate with government agencies, which do not provide translation resources into minority languages, even in municipalities traditionally densely populated by ethnic minorities and for service providers (e.g. the translation of public information, of statements, complaints and other documents into minority languages, and the operation of bilingual and trilingual websites). While the level of state language proficiency in large minority communities is drastically low (according to the 2014 census, 44.5% of ethnic Armenians and 73.9% of ethnic Azeris did not speak Georgian fluently), only state-language administrative proceedings were conducted for minority groups. Thus distrust and alienation arise from a state policy, which effectively becomes a structural factor creating social vulnerability.

This institutional barrier substantially complicates access to public services and other program benefits for minorities as well making it more difficult to build trust in government agencies. According to an ISSA 2019 survey, 69.9% of ethnic minorities surveyed say they have never addressed their own and their family's needs to local authorities. In the case of public interest, the lack of experience of appeal is even higher at 76.5%.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> *Ethnic Minority Employment Policy*, The Social Justice Center, 2020, available at: <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/etnikuri-umtsiresobebis-dasakmebis-politika>

<sup>8</sup> Survey on the Participation of Ethnic Minorities in Political Life, Institute for Social Research and Analysis (ISSA), 2019, available at: <https://osgf.ge/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Analytical-Report-ISSA-GEO.pdf>



According to Article 10 -2, paragraph 2 of the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, in an administrative unit where ethnic minorities either are, or traditionally have been, resident in large numbers, state authorities should as far as possible ensure the use of minority languages for the communication between the administrative body and the members of the ethnic minorities. In relation to state bodies, the linguistic rights of ethnic minorities are regulated by the Organic Law of Georgia on the State Language, which provides that in municipalities densely populated by ethnic minorities, the state must facilitate communication between the state/ local self-government bodies and members of the ethnic minority, by providing the assistance of an interpreter in the minority language (Article 9.3). Also, Articles 11 and 12 of the same law oblige the state to translate both the normative act adopted by the state/local self-government body, and the submitted statements, complaints and their responses into the language of the ethnic minority.

Despite the law on the state language, and the requirements of international conventions, local authorities (especially in Kvemo Kartli) do not fulfill the obligation to provide translation resources. Unfortunately, the strategies and recommendations for addressing this challenge are missing from the new strategy document.

The document positively assesses the abundant involvement of members of the ethnic minority in the work of local election commissions during the two parliamentary elections held in 2016-2020, and in one self-government election and one presidential election. However, the document does not raise the issue of the non-inclusive nature of both district and central election commissions. It should be noted that the vast majority of district election commissions, especially in Kvemo Kartli, are mono-ethnic, while the majority of the population of at least three municipalities in this region are ethnic minorities.

The issue of access to media and information is also included in this strategic priority. The document acknowledges that the COVID-19 pandemic and the pandemic-induced restrictions have exposed the problem of access to information and media for non-dominant ethnic groups. However, this recognition will not result in fundamental reforms and changes in terms of increasing access to information and media.<sup>9</sup> The strategy document and its action plan see a solution to the current problematic situation in the web portal of the Public Broadcasting Service, in supporting the printing of several local newspapers, and in training to counteract disinformation. However, it has nothing to say about new strategies and tools to enable the Public Broadcasting Service to broadcast in ethnic minority languages, about the coverage of ethnic minority concerns, or about the visibility of ethnic minority groups and better diversity in the service.

## Social and economic inclusion

---

<sup>9</sup> Ethnic Minority Needs, Public Broadcaster and Pandemic, The Social Justice Center, 2020, available at <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/etnikuri-umtsiresobebis-sachiroebebi-sazogadoebrivi-mautsqebeli-da-pandemia-1>

In the strategy document, the question of the social and economic integration of ethnic minorities is largely addressed by an approach to improving access to public services through information and awareness-raising campaigns. However, the document completely lacks a vision for development based on the specific needs and opportunities of the regions.

The Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti regions are actively involved in agricultural production. A significant share of potato production is concentrated in Samtskhe-Javakheti, where 52% of the country's potato plantations are located (2011). The harvest from this region is 22% higher than the average harvest from Georgia. Samtskhe-Javakheti, with an average area of 10,000 hectares of potato plantations, is followed by Kvemo Kartli with 7,000 hectares of land. Both regions grow about 85% of potatoes. According to the 2020 data of the National Statistics Office of Georgia, Kvemo Kartli ranks first in the production of all types of meat, and second in milk production; it ranks first in egg production and produces almost double the quantity produced by the region in second place; it occupies the second place in the production of beans and the first place in the production of vegetables. Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti are leaders in the field of livestock rearing, with the total number of cattle at around 250,000.

Against this background, the state of the social infrastructure in these regions is particularly alarming. Irrigation and drinking water systems are out of order in most villages, restricting the access of the local population to basic water resources. The percentage of households that receive drinking water through the water supply system installed in their living spaces is small. The percentage in Kakheti is 34.2%, and in Kvemo Kartli, 43.7%.<sup>10</sup> The gasification system is problematic in Samtskhe-Javakheti region where the natural conditions are strict (8 out of 31 villages in Ninotsminda and 22 out of 64 villages in Akhalkalaki are not gasified).

The issue of land redistribution and the legalization of property rights is critical in these regions, which has taken a historically unfair form due to clan governance and a system of ethnic preferences. Like other regions of Georgia, land fragmentation is problematic in these regions, which hinders the development of local farms. The whole country is dominated by small self-sufficient farms, 77% of which own less than 1 hectare of land.<sup>11</sup> Greenhouses are poorly developed in the Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli regions. The lack of logistics services and agricultural development centers is noticeable in both regions. Depreciated agricultural machinery and technologies pose an additional problem in the Javakheti region.<sup>12</sup> The population of Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti is in the most unfavorable situation in terms of access to public vocational schools.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Georgia Regional Development Program, 2018-2021, is available at: <https://bit.ly/3FoUJec>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



**It would be helpful if the strategy document provide a more detailed analysis and proposal for support policies for agriculture, as the main source of employment and income for the local population in Kvemo Kartli, Kakheti and Javakheti regions, and address ways of overcoming systemic barriers in the process** (For example, by encouraging the fair redistribution and registration of land, the elimination of the land fragmentation problem, the development of an irrigation water infrastructure, the development of agricultural technologies, and the introduction of agricultural insurance systems in these regions, etc.).

The document says nothing about the problem of the social exclusion and vulnerability of ethnic minorities or of ways to overcome it. Even on a cursory glance at the data it becomes clear that ethnic minorities are poorer and their social vulnerability is high. For example, according to the 2019 ISSA survey, the average monthly income of 27.6% of ethnic minorities surveyed is between 0 and 200 GEL. The subsistence level is considered to be 180 GEL and 21.9% of the population of Georgia is below this threshold (Georgian National Statistics Office, 2018).<sup>14</sup> According to the National Statistics office of Georgia the level of relative poverty is highest in Kvemo Kartli (32.7%). Similar trends are observed with respect to absolute poverty. Absolute poverty is highest in Shida Kartli and Kvemo Kartli. Also, according to the data of the National Statistics Office, the unemployment rate in Kvemo Kartli is the highest compared to other regions at 22.2% (the total national figure 18.5%). The level of education above the average is much lower in ethnic minorities: it is 32.6% for the total population, and 22.9% for ethnic minorities. The number of emigres is also sharply higher in the Kvemo Kartli region according to their place of residence from which they left, following the much higher numbers given in Tbilisi and Imereti. In the statistics for domestic economies, showing the extent to which different regions were able to make savings (according to the 2017 data), Kvemo Kartli region is ranked at third place from the bottom, among the regions with the lowest savings (after Guria and Shida Kartli). Against this background, it is interesting that the percentage of recipients of social benefits is the lowest in the Kvemo Kartli region at only 3.4% (This percentage is doubled or more than doubled for those regions which, like Kvemo Kartli, suffer the most socially severe conditions : Tbilisi - 14.73%; Imereti - 6.1%; Shida Kartli - 5.6%).

Despite this data, the strategy document does not discuss either the structural causes of social exclusion, nor its social consequences and effects at all, nor does it offer any emergency measures to address the need for addressing this reality. The document does not address the economic (class) dimension and relevance of ethnic exclusion, including the long-term impact of failures in education on the economic equality for ethnic minorities and the prospects for social and cultural development.

### Multilevel integration

---

<sup>14</sup> Survey on the Participation of Ethnic Minorities in Political Life, Institute for Social Research and Analysis (ISSA), 2019, available at: <https://osgf.ge/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Analytical-Report-ISSA-GEO.pdf>

Recent studies show that the population is dominated by perceptions of ethnic minorities from the perspective of security and ethno-religious and nationalist sentiments. According to a 2021 CRRC survey, 47% of the public think that the separatist wars in Georgia since acquiring independence show that ethnic and linguistic minorities are a “potential security threat” to the country. According to the same study, for a large part of the population, Georgian citizenship is still identified with linguistic, religious and ethnic affiliation. 91% of the population believe that a Georgian citizen should speak Georgian, 50% want him to be an Orthodox Christian, and 30% say he should be only ethnically Georgian.<sup>15</sup>

Although the document in its narrative part talks about the change of prejudices and attitudes among the ethnic majority, its proposed actions, which are intended to create positive perceptions in the society based on citizenship, democracy, inclusion and equality, are weak and poor. And, at the level of the action plan, the strategy again and again speaks of organizing meetings and campaigns for raising awareness among the non-dominant ethnic groups, instead of working to raise the awareness within the dominant group.

The strategy does not present radically new approaches to the introduction of civic national identity and equality in the policy of formal education (eg, revision of textbooks, special measures for the management and development of equality and of a multicultural environment in schools, or strengthening the proactive work of the Internal Audit Office).

The strategy contains no proposals to include anything in the education resources about the representation of ethnic minority culture and their history in Georgia. Erasing traces of ethnic / religious minorities from history, literature and other textbooks is one of the structural causes of social alienation between different ethnic groups. It is also the cause behind the monoethnic and mono-religious interpretation and understanding of the history of Georgia.

The objectives set by the strategy fall far short of the goal of multilevel integration and fail to show any interest in creating positive practices of dialogue and cooperation between different ethnic groups. The objective of building solidarity between different ethnic groups, which should be a very important area given our regional context (for example, the Karabakh war), has been completely omitted from the strategy document.

The document does not describe the grievances and criticisms of ethnic minorities about the preservation and sustainable development of their cultural identity,<sup>16</sup> nor does it outline any proposals for the creation of better protection, promotion of those minority cultural identities. More importantly, it does not address the creation of positive opportunities for intercultural dialogue and cooperation at the local level.

---

<sup>15</sup> CRRC, Georgian Citizen, 2020, is available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/dw2020ge/codebook/>

<sup>16</sup> *Signs of cultural domination and the erasure of minority culture in the Kvemo Kartli region*, The Social Justice Center, 2020, are available at: <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/kulturuli-dominatsiis-datumtsiresobebis-kulturis-tsashlis-nishnebi-kvemo-kartlis-regionshi>



## The issues completely omitted from the strategy

Some important areas which have been relevant in recent years and which have sometimes emerged in the form of severe crises, have been completely missed out in the strategy:

*Prevention of conflicts with ethnic connotations<sup>17</sup> and organization of work for peace, dialogue and solidarity in the communities particularly vulnerable to conflicts;*

*Facilitation of building confidence in law enforcement agencies, improving the efficiency of police work and the quality of human rights protection in ethnic minority regions;*

*Policies to deal with violent extremism, including the prevention and insurance of risks arising from radical ultraconservative groups to integration policies.*

*The Pankisi Gorge and the need to pursue democratic, inclusive and equitable policies in the area in the light of a number of crises throughout recent years<sup>18</sup> (including the case of Temirlan Machalikashvili's death,<sup>19</sup> police action in support of hydropower plants, events in Pankisi Gorge one year after the police special operation,<sup>20</sup> the high number of combatants leaving from the area to fight in Syria).*

The security and policing policies, which in reality often define policies towards ethnic minorities more than human rights provisions, and which are often associated with practices that are drastically detrimental to integration and human rights protection, are completely ignored in the strategy document. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is the complete omission of the planned strategic work in the Pankisi Gorge, which seems incomprehensible and problematic in the light of the fact that the Office of the State Minister planned to adopt a special action plan in previous years.

However, although the strategy document states that the achievements and progress of the integration policy are a message to Abkhazians and Ossetians living in the occupied territories of Georgia, giving them faith in our common future in a united state, where civil equality is guaranteed and the identity and rights of every citizen are protected, the document does not say anything about the needs and interests of ethnic Abkhazians and Ossetians living in the territories, nor it describes their aspirations and work. The document does not even attempt

---

<sup>17</sup> *The Dmanisi Conflict - Ethnic Features of Controversy Initiated on the day-to-day Grounds*, The Social Justice Center, 2021, available at: <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/dmanisis-konflikti-qofit-niadagze-datsqebuli-dapirispirebis-etnikuri-shtrikhebi>

<sup>18</sup> *Under the Watchful Eye of Security: History, Politics and Religion in the Pankisi Gorge*, The Social Justice Center, 2018, available at: <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/usaftrkhoebis-mzeris-kvesh-istoria-politika-da-religia-pankisis-kheobashi>

<sup>19</sup> The final assessment of the case of Machalikashvili's assassination, The Social Justice Center, 2020, is available at: <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/machalikashvilis-sitsotskhilis-khelqofis-sakmis-finaluri-shefaseba-etc>

<sup>20</sup> Pankisi Gorge a year later after the police special operation, 2020, is available at: <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/pankisis-kheoba-sapolitsio-spetsoperatsiidan-1-tslis-shemdeg>

to demonstrate that the government is trying to preserve the culture of Abkhazians and Ossetians, or to highlight events and locations which carry a positive memory and image of these cultures. The weakness and stagnation of the integration policy as a whole shows once again that this branch of policy is not viewed appropriately or prioritized even in the context of conflict transformation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

### Implementation and monitoring of the strategy and action plan

Interestingly, the document does not include a proposal for strengthening and refining the integration policy management system. The mandate of the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality in terms of its integration policy is often the subject of controversy. The agency has merely a coordinating role and is completely devoid of executive competencies. The agency also has inadequate consulting experience and, despite its apparent openness, it does not have a self-regulatory, democratic advisory council for ethnic minorities that could assemble in order to raise issues for the state minister and government in a self-organized and proactive manner. It would be significant if the coordination work of the agency could be further strengthened, and if it could firm up the policy-making process on specific issues and enable well-coordinated and timely response mechanisms to individual crises, in addition to routine oversight of the implementation of the action plan. At the same time, we consider it important to delegate an executive-style mandate to this agency in certain areas (for example, the peaceful transformation of conflicts, the strengthening of youth policy in ethnic minority communities) and to grant direct enforcement competencies to relevant programs and resources. We consider it fundamentally important to create a regular, democratic and self-organized advisory mechanism within the work of this agency, which would become an institutional guarantee of democracy and accountability of the agency. Clearly, against this background, it will be important to encourage support for the agency's budget.

The problematic nature of the rule of the adoption of action plans related to the strategy document should also be mentioned here. Unfortunately, action plans are only one year old, often have a more technical content, and do not in practice allow for proper measurement of the achievement of large-scale tasks. It should be pointed out that the adoption of action plans is often done without the participation of civil society organizations. The 2021 Action Plan was also adopted in such a way that civil society organizations were not even given a chance to comment on it.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the ten-year state strategy for civic equality and integration fails to offer a substantial, transformational and in-depth policy to change the current situation. The strategy document is written in an updated and relatively sensitive language, although it essentially replicates the practice of previous years, where its strategic priorities, goals and objectives could not be translated into everyday, real, institutional, legislative and administrative



changes. Unfortunately, the evaluation of the strategy document and its action plan shows that decision makers and authors of the strategy fail properly to assess the root causes of the current situation and as a result fail to offer theories of change that would let us take important steps towards civic equality and integration.

The many initiatives, activities, and tasks included in the Strategy Document and its Action Plan are noteworthy, the implementation of which is critical for achieving civic equality and integration. However, performing such activities and / or tasks without transformational aspirations, theories of ambitious change, and real political will does not lead to the great goal of achieving substantial equality. Consequently, at the level of the strategy document, it has once again emerged that integration policy is not one of the high priorities of the government and it routinely continues the ineffective actions of previous years.