



# OVERVIEW OF THE NEEDS OF SMALL ETHNIC GROUPS IN KVARELI MUNICIPALITY

# **Overview of the needs of small ethnic groups in Kvareli Municipality**

Social Justice Center

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## Introduction and research methodology

Kvarli municipality is an ethnically diverse region, where small ethnic groups of Georgia - Ossetians, Udis, and Avars<sup>1</sup> live in villages located close to each other, along with Georgians. The Ossetians live in the village of Tsitskanaantser, the Udis live in the village of Zinobiani, and the Avars live in the villages of Tivi, Chantliskure and Saruso. In the municipality of Kvareli, one can also meet the villages inhabited by Catholics - Mtistziri and Sanavardo.

The present study presents the results of the research on the needs of the Udis and Avars.<sup>2</sup> To study the conditions of Udis and Avars in the villages inhabited, the Social Justice Center conducted on-site fieldwork for an extended period of time.

The field work included inspection of the infrastructure of the villages, cultural and social gathering places, as well as visiting and observing the main gathering place of the ethnic groups - the market of Akhalsopeli. In addition, for the purposes of the research, a questionnaire for identifying the problems was created and was used for conducting 12 individual in-depth interviews and one focus group in the Avar villages, and 5 individual in-depth interviews and one focus group with Udis in the village of Zinobiani. The needs depicted in the study were also identified in the Avar community, in the village of Tivi, through the legal aid clinic conducted by the Social Justice Center.

The study of the rural needs shows that the central and local authorities are weak in detecting the specific needs of small ethnic groups and also weak in understanding and supporting the unique diversity in this municipality. It is also important to note that the place of settlement of Udi and Avar groups is mostly Kvareli municipality, and the exclusion and challenges in these villages affect the situation of the entire Avar and Udi communities as ethnic groups. Taking this into account, the role and responsibilities of local self-government are particularly high, and municipal policy needs an active consideration of this context. Unfortunately, these groups have almost no representatives in local bodies, which reduces their ability to influence the political agenda and decision-making process.

Georgia, as a signatory country of the European Framework Convention on the Protection of the National Minorities, has undertaken to ensure the protection of the rights of all ethnic groups living on its territory, including small ethnic groups. This obligation includes, among other things, protecting their cultural and linguistic rights, creating conditions for full participation in public life, and protecting them from any form of discrimination. This commitment is expressed by the state in providing equal access to basic needs and improving social and economic conditions for small ethnic groups, as well as in taking special, positive measures for equal participation and preservation of their culture, language and traditions.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, the importance of the state's positive obligations is poorly reflected in the existing integration policy, which requires it to understand the existing structural inequality, historically formed injustices, and implement measures based on positive interventions towards different ethnic groups. In the existing strategy of civil equality and integration, the issues of protecting the rights of small ethnic groups are scarcely reflected and it lacks a nuanced analysis of the social essence of these groups. Beyond the commitment to teach the languages of small groups, which was an important state decision at the time, efforts to protect their cultural identity and create an inclusive cultural environment in diverse municipalities do not go

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<sup>1</sup> In Georgian academic literature, Avars are referred to as Khundzi. However, community members call themselves Avars, and we used their self-identification names in this document.

<sup>2</sup> Note: The Social Justice Center is preparing an independent document on the situation of the ethnic Ossetian community in the Kakheti region, which will be published as a separate document in the near future.

further. The purpose of the present study is to describe this reality in detail and show the needs, concerns and interests of these groups before the decision-making bodies, as well as the actors implementing the development projects.

## **An overview of the needs of the Avar community**

### **General context**

#### ***Geographical and demographic data***

The villages of Chantliskure, Tivi, and Saruso are on average 15 kilometers from the center of Kvareli municipality, and only a few kilometers from each other. There is no public transport connecting the villages and the center of the municipality. For daily needs, the residents go to the nearest village - Akhalsopeli. In this village, along with large shops, pharmacies, and financial institutions, there is also a Sunday market, where they go. Families use private cars or taxis for transportation.

Despite the fact that Avar villages are located next to each other, the communities living here have different lifestyles and activities. The degree of their integration and connections with the center of the municipality differ. However, the inhabitants of all three villages are connected to Dagestan through close family ties and family relations.

According to the general census of 2014, the number of Avars<sup>4</sup> in Georgia is three thousand. The community practices Sunni Islam. They speak different dialects among themselves, but the residents of all three villages know the Avar language, which they study two hours a week in the public schools of Tivi, Chantliskur, and Saruso. The majority of the community are also fluent in Georgian and Russian languages.<sup>5</sup>

#### ***Historical context and current daily life***

Avars are an ethnically heterogeneous community displaced from Dagestan after the Caucasian wars of the 19th century. In the 20th century, World War II caused a second wave of emigration. In the 1990s, chauvinistic statements were made against the Avar community, creating an ethnically tense environment. In the interviews, the elderly respondents recall that at that time, the government actively tried to clear the villages of Avars and resettle Georgian families. To do so, they were offered money and were exposed to difficult living conditions (blockade of the village entrances and food supply, etc.). One of the residents of Tivi recalls: "During Gamsakhurdia, everything was closed, there was a picket, they didn't let us in the car, there was no bread. There were 20 cars at the village entrance, and they did not let us in. You must leave. So some have left. Once we went to Akhalsopel for bread, they met us on the road and took everything from us. Many left at that time. Tkhltskaro has completely disappeared, all Georgians are settled there now."

Due to those circumstances, some community members left Georgia and moved to Dagestan; however, they still maintained their ties with Georgia. Interestingly, the cases of seasonal and temporary migration in the community were frequent even during the Soviet Union. However, permanently leaving the places of residence has become more prevalent since the end of the 1990s. The general census data also shows a noticeable migration of the Avar population.

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<sup>4</sup> Note from the Social Justice Center: Avars call themselves Avars and their common language Avar. However, in Georgian academic literature, the Hundzi people and language are also used, which does not reflect the diversity within the community. In addition, they are referred to by the name of Leks, to which Avars have no problem with. For the purposes of the research, the name used by the community itself will be used - Avars, and in the case of the language - Avar language.

<sup>5</sup> Georgian Avars, Gia Nodia, p. 4

According to the data of 1989, 4230 Avars lived in Georgia. Based on the 2002 general census results, the number decreased by more than half, equating to the data of 1996. As of 2014, the number of Avars has increased since the beginning of the 2000s and, as mentioned above, amounts to 3,000.<sup>6</sup>

Although they have strong economic and family ties with Dagestan, community representatives often note that this environment is native to them. The population that has migrated to Dagestan goes to the villages at least once a year, especially in the summer when the community is united by a village holiday and traditional wrestling games.

### *Everyday life of Avars today*

According to local residents, the policy pursued by the center in the 1990s did not change the relationship between the communities, and the negative perceptions and expectations of the government at that time did not turn into hatred on ethnic grounds.

According to the residents, the neighboring villages live peacefully with each other, although they do not have many contact points and shared activities. The prominent place for public meetings is Akhalsopli market. They often ask each other for help with the field work and harvesting in exchange for payment. Also, they meet each other during traditional village holidays. However, as residents note, villages do not have many such events and more often, communities are isolated from each other. Those pupils who reach the last level of school, in Akhalsopeli school, Georgians and Udis students study in mixed classes. As they say, apart from school, they do not have places for socialization, cultural exchange, and informal education. Mixed marriages between villages are rare, although the respondents mentioned such cases.

The majority of the Tivi village population is elderly. The majority of the population declares remittances as the primary source of income. Also, in the Saruso village, it is common for young people to go to Dagestan for labor migration and to send money to their families from there. There are also cases of going to EU countries for work.

In Chantliskure, they mainly practice cattle breeding and vegetable farming. This is due to the fact that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Chantliskure Avar community managed to privatize the agricultural lands, which was made difficult for the families living in Tiva and Saruso. Respectively, the Avars have more opportunities for cattle breeding and the development of agro-cultures. In Saruso, young people name private and seasonal jobs as the primary source of income. In addition, for them, it is also common to gain an income through migrating to Dagestan.

### *Needs identified in the Avar community*

**Lack of assistance from local authorities due to small number of population:** The lack of attention to the village by the local self-government was named as one of the most seriously perceived problems for the residents of the villages of Tivi, Chantliskur, and Saruso, which undermines the principle of equality. During the interviews, it was revealed that according to the population, Avar villages are not given attention due to being small in number. Therefore, listening to their concerns and taking into account their needs is not particularly important, as it may be in other large villages, where there is potentially an opportunity to gain more votes for elections. Respectively, they have to apply to the municipality many times before the basic living conditions are met, which is mostly limited to promises. It should also be noted that Avars do not have representatives in local self-government bodies and they are not employed in decision-making positions.

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<sup>6</sup> Ethnic groups in Georgia, historical review, Library of the Public Defender of Georgia, 2008; p. 153; Georgian Avars., Gia Nodia., p. 4;

**Distrust of political processes and advocacy efforts:** Distrust towards visits to villages by state representatives or various organizations working on the needs of the community was highlighted as one of the challenges in the villages. A large part of the interviewed population in Tivi, Chantliskure, and Saruso thinks that nothing has been solved by talking about their needs and they have no hope that anything will change in the future. According to them, only people who know people in high places manage to bring their voices to the decision-makers, which is difficult for ordinary citizens.

**Isolation from the center of the municipality and access to information:** In Avar villages, moving to the municipality's center is a big problem for the population. In the village of Tivi, where primarily older persons live, in the absence of connecting transport, it is challenging for the resident to receive their pension. Because of this, they have to use very expensive taxi services, especially considering the difficult economic conditions. In addition, in Tivi, Saruso, and Chantliskure, living without a car or taxi means, in effect, being excluded from public services. Consequently, the population finds itself almost in isolation, where receiving information about state services, social and healthcare programs is difficult. In addition, Internet connection is absent in the villages of Tivi and Saruso, which makes it even more difficult to receive information.

**Drinking and irrigation water problem:** The water problem especially worries the residents of Tivi, who have been bringing drinking water from other villages by taxi for several years. Water is not a problem in the village of Saruso, and it is relatively less of a problem in Chantliskure. In the conversation with the residents of Tivi, it becomes clear that they have been officially appealing to the local authorities for years but receiving only promises. Along with the water problem, the irrigation canals are also polluted. According to the residents, the municipality promised to solve both problems by 2023 and to include these expenses in the budget; however, they are still in suspense. Lack of water also hinders agricultural work in the village.

**Absence of preschool educational institution:** According to the elder of the village, 64 children of kindergarten age live in the village of Chantliskure. Despite the fact that the population has applied to the local authorities several times with the request to build a kindergarten, so far, in the village, there is only a preschool education institution, which is opened in the school building. The absence of a kindergarten is particularly problematic because Georgian is a second language for children, and they are spoken to in the Avar dialect in their families. Children have to overcome the difficulties of learning Georgian during the basic level of school due to missing the opportunity to study the Georgian language in preschool education.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the absence of a garden prevents women from participating in public life. Also, they cannot get employment in seasonal jobs, which are often an essential source of income for families. During the conversation with the village's elder, it was also revealed that the mentioned issue is often discussed at the elders' meeting, which is convened three times a year by the municipality and is a union of several villages. In 2023, the inhabitants of the Avar villages raised the issue of the kindergarten with the Minister of State for Reconciliation and Civil Integration at a meeting. The residents of Tiv, with relatively few children, are also concerned about the kindergarten issue and ask for transportation to take the children to the kindergarten in the neighboring village.

**Issue of citizenship:** A large part of the Avar community has family and kinship ties in Dagestan. Many of them have received their education in Makhachkala, many of them have family members living there and provide financial support to the family members who remain here. According to the residents of the village

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<sup>7</sup> In the Avar community, as in the case of other ethnic groups living compactly in Georgia, there should be an opportunity to receive bilingual education, both in preschool and school. Such realization of the right to education by the state for a small ethnic group will significantly help the child to quickly learn the state language from the kindergarten age, which is one of the essential requests and needs of the community members. At the same time, it will contribute to the development of the Avar language, and in the future, the language will not be in danger of extinction. The right to receive education in the mother tongue is the right of all ethnic groups, and, according to international standards, the mechanism of bilingual education best contributes to the full realization of this right.

of Tivi, some of their relatives and neighbors are citizens of the Russian Federation. Of these, only few individuals have dual citizenship, and most of them do not have legal status in Georgia. Respectively, they are unable to benefit from Georgia's state services, including universal health care, social assistance, and pension programs. Against the background of family and kinship ties with Dagestan, they also cannot renounce Russian citizenship, which is a way of obtaining Georgian citizenship,<sup>8</sup> except in cases where a person lost Georgian citizenship due to obtaining citizenship of another country. In such a case, a person has the opportunity to claim the citizenship of Georgia, without giving up the citizenship of another country.<sup>9</sup>

Several respondents in the village of Tivi mentioned that they lost their Georgian citizenship years ago. Some applied for restoration of their citizenship, but they were refused. They are not fully informed about the exact articles and reasoning for the refusal. It should be noted that there is a lack of information about such issues among the population. Some of them say that the state and local structures provide information about specific legal procedures in an unclear manner. Based on the interviews, it is also clear that those who have only Georgian citizenship have not been able to visit their family members and close relatives in Dagestan for years due to one-way traffic on the border.

**The problem of ambulatory and doctor:** In Tivi village, the population raised the issue of ambulatory as one of the problems that has been bothering the population for years. The residents of Tivi have submitted an appeal regarding the doctor to the local authority, but they did not receive a response. The issue of the doctor is also problematic in Saruso village. Although the population is satisfied with the state emergency service, the lack of a village doctor to benefit from the universal health care program is a significant challenge for them. The issue is especially problematic for the elderly, who, in the absence of public transport, are deprived of unlimited access to medical services in addition to receiving a pension.

**Rural lands and pastures:** The most frequently mentioned problem in the Avar community is rural lands and pastures. A large part of rural lands was transferred to individual ownership in the 1990s. According to the residents of Tivi and Saruso villages, in the backdrop of the state policy, during the process of privatization, poor families were not taken into account.

While interviewing the community members living in Chantliskure, some of them mentioned that the other two villages were mainly engaged in trade during the Soviet Union. Consequently, agricultural works were alien to them compared to the community living in Chantliskure. According to them, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the issue of the ownership of common agricultural lands was more of a priority for the ethnic Avars living in the village of Chantliskure. However, the elderly residents of the village of Tivi recall in interviews the tension between the Georgian and Avar communities regarding the redistribution of land in the period after the collapse of the Soviet Union. One of them also told us that he managed to own part of the common land as a result of great efforts. The inhabitants of Tivi also note that the issue of pastures is still problematic in the village. They have a relatively small number of cattle in the Tivi, and the pastures they use, as they say, they "hold to them with their teeth." They are also waiting for systematic registration so that the land is legally transferred to the ownership of the Tivi population.

According to the population, the land distribution at that time was unfair. Although the tensions of the 1990s soon ended, they left the community with the scarcity of basic needs for a long time. Many Avar families left the villages. The village of Tkhiltskaro, located near Tivi village, was completely abandoned. The lands, which were already appropriated, obviously, after the end of the tense period, they could not regain them afterwards.

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<sup>8</sup> Article 17, Organic Law of Georgia on Citizenship

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. clause 4 of Article 32(2). It should be noted that in order to ensure the mentioned right, a person must submit an application by December 31, 2024.



The Avar community living in the village of Chantliskure is in the same dire situation with regard to pastures. Here too, the population is actively involved, but their opinions are not being considered. The population claims that the pastures were allocated without consulting with them. In 2017, 22 hectares of pasture land was transferred to a private owner through the decision of the recognition commission. It should be noted that the mentioned land was in ownership even before 2012 and was fenced without registration of ownership. According to the residents, after 2012, the fence was removed and the village could use the pasture, but since 2017, they can no longer use the land. Regarding this issue, the village has appealed several times, but there has been no response from the relevant authorities.

**Social issues and unemployment:** The residents of Tivi, Chantliskurm and Saruso state unemployment and social problems as the most common problems. In villages, they mostly complete the basic level of school, the 9th grade; the rest complete secondary education in the nearby village of Akhalsofel. However, it is common that families do not like their daughters going to another village for school everyday; therefore, some of them, against their will, are left without secondary education. Fewer are those who go to universities for higher education. Some young people study in the nearby vocational school to master a specific profession. Most young people interviewed are pessimistic about the opportunities after graduating from university. Consequently, many choose to stay in the village, start a family and engage in agricultural activities. Young people who are studying in Tbilisi for higher education express a great desire to return to the village, although they find it difficult to make concrete plans against the background of lack of prospects and unemployment. The outflow of young people from the villages is a particularly big problem for the Tivi village, where mostly elderly people live. The village is becoming empty and the interest in its development is decreasing more and more.

The main sources of income in the villages of Tivi and Saruso are the seasonal work provided by private employers and money sent by family members from abroad (mainly the Russian Federation). The representatives of the Avar community in the mentioned villages have almost no land in their possession. In the village of Chantliskure, the situation is different in this regard, as more families own land that they use for cattle breeding and various farms.

#### **Limiting the right to education for women in the context of poor economic and social conditions:**

The survey revealed that women are underrepresented in public life. In Avar villages, marriage without a girl's consent is still common. In some cases, women think that as there is a lack of prospects and unemployment, creating a family is a hope for girls and the most valuable thing a young person can do at such a time. There are cases when girls want to continue their studies, but because they are already engaged and their family or fiancé is against it, they terminate their studies. Often, this is due to socio-economic conditions. In the village of Tivi, the cases of girls continuing their studies after finishing school are more frequent than in Chantliskure and Saruso. Most of them are studying in Tbilisi; however, in the Avar community, there are frequent cases of continuing their studies in Russia.

Women's involvement in socio-economic life is aggravated by the lack of kindergartens or transportation to other villages, limiting women's participation in economic activities. Women's employment is often a necessary source of income for the family, which complicates the situation even more.

**The issue of the house of worship:** In the villages, the population is mainly responsible for constructing and maintaining mosques. A representative of the community living in Dagestan built a mosque in Saruso village. The mosque is not on the state's balance, which is named a challenging factor when the population requests the municipality to allocate funds for its maintenance. Accordingly, the village tries to mobilize funds on their own. The mosque is one of the important meeting places in the village, where the internal affairs of the village are often settled. Regarding the maintenance of the chapel, the residents of the village of Chantliskure also note that the villagers collect money and take care of it. They say the municipality sometimes helps them, but more is needed, and they still have to mobilize their resources.

**Encouraging the Avar language and preserving the culture:** The population believes that one hour allocated in school is insufficient for learning the Avar language well. The non-existence of Avar language textbooks is another problem. The community tries to collect textbooks in Dagestan, which is also problematic, as transporting them across the border is a bureaucratic problem.

Usually, the community organizes holidays by self-organization. They try to preserve village traditions and religious or secular events with their funds. However, inhabitants of Tivi noted that the municipality provides some financial support on the day of wrestling, which is one of the most significant events for the entire Avar population, in which Avars living abroad also come to the villages and participate in the event.

**The problem of internal roads:** Internal roads in Avar villages are in bad condition. Even though the residents of the villages raised the issue many times through various platforms, including the meetings of the village elders, the problem was not resolved in any village. According to the inhabitants, there are cases when the taxi does not go all the way to the villages due to the road conditions. When public transport does not go to the villages this causes isolation from the municipality center and lack of information.

**Absence of street lights:** In some areas of the villages, there are no street lights, which causes security concerns. It is especially problematic if the family has cattle because there are cases of jackals coming from the forest. Residents have appealed to the local authorities to eliminate this problem, but the issue is still unresolved in some areas.

**Youth needs:** Young people in Chantliskure have been asking for a sports hall for a long time, but with no luck. In the village of Tivi, one of the young people mentioned that during the school period, due to the absence of a youth center, the students were involved in various activities at the youth center of Akhalsopeli. However, the village is quite far, and walking is not so safe; therefore, they were not actively involved in the Akhalsopeli youth center. There is no such center in Chantliskure or Saruso either.

## Needs of the Udi community

### General context overview

The Udis are one of the oldest ethnic groups in the Caucasus. In 1920-1922, they moved from the village of Vartashni in Azerbaijan due to persecution and attacks. Representatives of the Udi community are Orthodox Christians, although there are Nijelni Udi who belong to the Armenian Church. References to Udis can be found in ancient Near East and classical antiquity sources. Based on these sources, several authors conclude that Udis are descendants of Caucasian Albanians.<sup>10</sup> Zinob Silikashvili was leading the migration of the Udis to Georgia. Because of him, the village was named Zinobiani; however, after 1937, Zinobiani was renamed October, and Zinobi Silikashvili was shot during the Soviet repression.

Despite their small number, the Udis still managed to maintain their ethnic identity. The community is self-organized and actively preserving culture, traditions, and language. There is a newly opened museum in the village, where visitors get an idea of the Udi identity and migration history. Also, there is a family hotel, which plays a significant role in developing tourism in the village and increasing the awareness of the Udi community. The native language of the Udis is Udi, although it is on the verge of extinction. In most cases, their first language is Georgian; therefore, the issue of integration with the surrounding Georgian villages is less of a problem in the community than in the case of other ethnic minorities.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Publication of Public Defender.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

According to the 2014 general census data, 337 Udi live in the village of Zinobiani, and there are 900 in the whole country.

Zinobiani village is 13 kilometers away from the center of Kvareli municipality. The central part of the rural population makes a living by viticulture, cattle breeding, gardening, selling products in the market and through private jobs. The Udi community has close ties with Georgians; there are mixed families, too. Also, some of the villagers often go abroad to work, resulting in the village and the community being empty from time to time.

### Needs identified in the Udi community

**Identity preservation and visibility:** One of the essential challenges of the Udi community is their visibility in society. Because the first language of the Udis is Georgian, it is sometimes difficult for the people living in the neighboring villages to perceive their different identity. An open conversation about the Udi identity started recently following increased interest of the people and researchers in Udi culture and traditions.

Today, the Udi community is the most self-organized minority ethnic group in Georgia. Thanks to their activism, the village of Zinobiani received EU funding to construct a road, a library and a square. However, young activists express concern that the municipality itself is not effectively involved in strengthening the community's cultural rights.

**Threat of losing the Udi language:** According to the population, the Udi language is in danger. Young people no longer speak this language. Many of them know it, but they usually do not use it. In addition, the Udi language, like Avar, has a few hours at school, which is not enough to achieve results. The Ministry of Education also developed and sent the textbooks to schools, but no one checked the accuracy of the textbooks because no one knew how to do it.

**Employment issue:** In the Udi community, unlike the Avars, employment in the center of the municipality is common. Young people have mostly gone to study in Tbilisi. Although they want to return to the village, they also think that the resources and work invested in education will not be appreciated in the village, so returning to the village is not an alternative for them. In this condition, it is especially important for the state to promote the development of new economic opportunities in this village. In this regard, the area of interest for the community is the development of tourism and the use of local natural and cultural resources.

**The problem of ambulatory and doctor:** The village of Zinobiani is administratively united with the adjacent village of Chikaani. They share an ambulatory and a doctor with the village of Gavaz, which is relatively far away, 8 kilometers away and challenging to reach. According to the residents, the doctor is often absent even if there is no problem reaching the place. At such a time, the community's only solution is to refuse medical services based on a doctor's referral and pay for medical examinations despite the right to use universal health care. The elderly representatives of the community mostly experience the mentioned problem because many young people do not live in the village, and it becomes difficult for older people, who depend on a pension and often have to carry out such procedures, to benefit from health care programs effectively.

**The problem of internal roads:** One of the problems in the village of Zinobiani is the rehabilitation of roads. The municipality does not take care of road maintenance in the village. And the amount allocated by the European Union for roads, library, and square was not enough for the rehabilitation of all the roads of the village. Accordingly, the population living in the area beyond the constructed road expresses dissatisfaction.

**Water problem:** In the village of Zinobiani, water comes on schedule; therefore, it often needs to be cleaned. The population has gathered many times to talk about this topic and appealed to the local bodies;

however, the municipality states that the only way out is the individual metering of expenditure. Metering is not a good solution for a large part of the rural population, who use water for irrigation.

**Transport:** to a certain extent, public transport is not a problem; however, only two minibuses run from the center of Kvarli to the village of Zinobiani during the day; sometimes, one of them may not complete the ride, and the resident will not be able to return from Kvarli to the village.

**Status of women:** Women in the Udi community have more or less equal-based relationships. The community representatives did not identify barriers preventing women from engaging in social, economic or cultural activities. Women also face the same barriers as all residents living in the village, which mainly indicates the families' small financial capacity and the villages' poverty. Talking to the women in the village of Zinobiani, it was revealed that the women work hard to earn tuition fees for their children, which helps the young people who study in the capital. Women take an active part in the village meetings. Udi young women are involved in popularizing the culture of the Udi community. Their efforts allowed the creation of a family hotel and a museum about the past of the Udi and their settlement in Georgia.

**Participation of the youth:** the voice of the youth is often not heard in village meetings. Many people believe their position has no meaning and older people decide everything. According to some young people, it is often true that when you want to take a specific stance and express your opinion at the village meeting, it is often not taken seriously by the older generation.

### **International and governmental assessments of the legal status of a small ethnic groups in Georgia**

**Opinions of the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention on National Minorities:** The Advisory Committee of the Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities, during the reporting years, along with other ethnic groups, focused on the legal status of minority ethnic groups in Georgia. The Advisory Committee discusses **the need for equal medical and other infrastructural conditions.**<sup>12</sup> The Committee points out that in Georgia, small ethnic groups often live in small villages on the border, far from the center, which creates natural barriers for a particular group regarding access to basic resources and information about them.<sup>13</sup>

The Advisory Committee also talks about the need **to protect the identity and culture of small ethnic groups.** According to the Committee, allocating financial resources specifically for financing cultural activities is crucial for increasing their awareness in society and strengthening their identity. The Committee is concerned that experienced organizations do not sufficiently assist small ethnic groups. Accordingly, with positive mechanisms, the allocation of funds for such organizations, which specifically work on the preservation of the culture, identity, and traditions of small ethnic minorities at the local level, may have a positive impact on the mentioned process.<sup>14</sup>

The Committee also notes that information on state funding and related procedures for cultural events managed by several organizations working on minorities in the region is unavailable.<sup>15</sup> The funding of the Ministry of Culture is mainly used for printing a newspaper in the language of the minorities, and there is no money left for the organized cultural events of these groups.

In the Committee's opinion, it is essential to distinguish between state funding, which is used for the regular production of a newspaper in minority languages, and funding, which will be allocated specifically for the

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<sup>12</sup> Second Opinion, 2012, Georgia.,125.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Second Opinion, Georgia, 54.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 41.

cultural events of small ethnic minorities. Such measures contribute to preserving their identity and raising awareness about groups in society, which requires special attention from the state structures.<sup>16</sup>

**Encouraging the languages of minority ethnic groups is another important prerequisite for protecting rights.** In this regard, the Advisory Committee of the Framework Convention urges the state to ratify the European Charter on Regional and Minority Languages, which would protect the languages of small ethnic groups that are on the verge of disappearing and require special attention.<sup>17</sup> To preserve languages, it is also important not only to devote specific hours to relevant languages within the school's academic curriculum but also to monitor the quality of teaching and textbooks.<sup>18</sup>

**According to the opinion of the Advisory Committee, the presence of quality media in the languages of small ethnic minorities, as well as appropriate coverage of them in the media, will significantly contribute to the formation of a diverse media environment.** The need to activate **print media and its additional financial support to make print media available in the languages of small ethnic minorities** is significant.<sup>19</sup>

Concerning languages, the Committee also notes the importance of establishing standards tailored to the rights of ethnic minorities so that all ethnic groups, including small ethnic groups, can **communicate with state bodies and receive information in their language.**<sup>20</sup>

Effective participation in public life, which is protected by Article 15 of the Framework Convention, is particularly important in the context of protecting the rights of ethnic minorities.<sup>21</sup> The degree of participation of minorities in all spheres of life is considered one of the indicators of the level of pluralism and democracy in society. That is why member states are obliged to consider the creation of conditions for the effective participation of persons belonging to national minorities as an integral part of implementing proper governance principles in a pluralistic society.<sup>22</sup>

Inadequate implementation of the right to effective participation in public life can create significant obstacles for ethnic minorities to enjoy various rights. Public life in this context does not only mean participation in public affairs and decisions, but also includes involvement in economic and social life.

The rather general wording of Article 15 allows for its broad application. The Advisory Committee of the Framework Convention has consistently emphasized the importance of the inclusive approach guaranteed by Article 15. Consultative mechanisms and advisory councils on issues related to the protection of minority rights aim to encourage dialogue and discussion between different social groups. In discussing Article 15, the Consultative Committee gave it a broader scope and increased the range of issues in which representatives of ethnic minorities should participate. The Committee stated that participation issues should not be limited to the preservation of ethnic minority culture or the allocation of funds but that Article 15 covers broader societal issues and not only issues of concern to minorities but also to the majority.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 41-44

<sup>17</sup> Second Opinion, 2012, Georgia., 79.

<sup>18</sup> Third Opinion, 2019., p. 124

<sup>19</sup> Third Opinion., p. 96.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> OSCE., p.22

<sup>22</sup> Review of international standards related to the rights of ethnic minorities, Human Rights Training and Monitoring Center (EMC). 2019., pp.52-56.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



The Lund recommendations of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have been issued on the right to effective and active participation in public life. The recommendations call on states to create special mechanisms to increase the participation of national minorities in public and political life and their representation in parliament, government, and the judicial sector. The policies developed by the executive authorities should take the issues of minorities. OSCE recommendations also refer to the electoral system, which should promote the representation and influence of minorities.

The creation of consulting and advisory bodies is considered a good mechanism for this, which serves as a dialogue between the state government and the minority. The OSCE believes that the effective participation of national minorities in social and political life requires the creation of consultative mechanisms to prevent conflicts and resolve disputes, as well as, if necessary, the possibility of creating emergency and alternative mechanisms.<sup>24</sup>

### Approaches of the state strategy and action plan to civil equality and integration

In the 2021-2030 State Strategy for Civil Equality and Integration, as well as in the Annual Action Plans of the government, obligations related to minority ethnic groups are minimally reflected.<sup>25</sup> According to the 2023-2024 Action Plan, minority ethnic groups are mentioned in the section on ensuring access to quality general education (task 3.2). Specifically, it includes, as required, the introduction of minority ethnic languages in schools.<sup>26</sup> The action plan also envisages holding meetings with small ethnic groups for the purpose of developing mechanisms for effective implementation of active and passive electoral rights (task 5.2). Beyond the above-mentioned tasks, the Action Plan for 2023-2024 does not say anything specifically regarding the small ethnic groups.<sup>27</sup>

The Strategy Document is an important tool for the political, social and economic empowerment of small ethnic groups. However, without effective mechanisms of accountability and democratic, bottom-up approaches to developing Action Plans related to the strategy, it will not have the opportunity to create a truly equal environment for specific groups.

In this regard, it is crucial to strengthen the state institutions, on the one hand, in the issues of rights and equality of ethnic minorities, and on the other hand, to carry out democratic and cooperative measures. In this direction, close work with local activists, community leaders, and organizations working with small ethnic groups will help state institutions base their policies on actual needs and create honest dialogue and consultation processes with community members.

## Conclusion

The visit to the villages of Kvareli municipality, inhabited by small ethnic groups and interviews with community members revealed important needs and concerns.

Regarding small ethnic groups, it is particularly important that state institutions and local self-government bodies show special attention to the study of their needs and use proactive and democratic approaches to research and data collection. It is essential that small ethnic groups are not left feeling that because of their

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> The 2021-2030 State Strategy for Civil Equality and Integration is available at: <https://smr.gov.ge/uploads/Files/%E1%83%98%E1%83%9C%E1%83%A2%E1%83%94%E1%83%92%E1%83%A0%E1%83%90%E1%83%AA%E1%83%98%E1%83%90/646-1.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p.11

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p.21

small number, their interests and needs are neglected and less supported by the state. This approach will create a climate of isolation and mistrust for small ethnic groups and damage the process of building a pluralistic, equal, and multicultural society. Unfortunately, state strategies and action plans for civil equality and integration hardly even mention the Udi and Avar communities and are less sensitive to the needs of other small ethnic groups.

In this process, it is especially important for local governments and agencies working on integration and civil equality issues to have democratic and inclusive consultation platforms, which on the one hand will give communities the opportunity to influence the decision-making process, and on the other hand, will create a space for dialogue and cooperation between different ethnic groups. Unfortunately, there is no such inclusive, multicultural consultation platform in Kvareli Municipality. The community of Udis and Avars is also weakly represented in the consultation processes operating at the central level.

In the Avar community, the research found more than one social challenge: limited access to drinking and irrigation water, preschool education, public transport, internal roads, access to information, healthcare, and social programs. According to the opinion of the community, the municipality should be able to allocate the budget effectively and purposefully, to study well what are the real needs of the village and to focus on the interests of the population.

Unfortunately, the feeling of desperation and hopelessness prevails in the Avar villages. They do not feel support from the local authorities, and in case of setting specific demands, they do not hope for changes. Historically, the unfair distribution of agricultural land resources in these villages created a strong sense of inequality in the community, and its negative social effects are still visible today. The state needs to lay down ways to solve the acute social needs of the local population regarding land resources. Moreover, agriculture remains the leading economic activity in this community. The survival issue of Udi cultural identity and language is particularly acute, so young activists spend a lot of energy to preserve and spread Udi's culture, customs, and history. It is necessary to take specific steps at the local government level regarding the visibility of community identity and promote the integration of all small ethnic groups living in Kvareli municipality with each other and with Georgian villages.

At the level of Kvareli municipality, there is a lack of inclusive policies and multicultural experiences, which would improve relations between communities and create common platforms for cultural dialogues and social relations. The central and local bodies of the state need to strengthen their work in the direction of social inclusion and building a multicultural environment. In this direction, it is important for the municipality of Kvareli to work on the creation of such multicultural spaces and programs that will give the Udi and Avar communities the opportunity to protect and develop their cultural traditions. At the same time, it would allow other people to interact with this culture, too.

In the form of an appendix, a table of the issues that require a systematic response in these two communities is presented. We hope that this review will become a useful working document for relevant agencies and organizations in the process of developing action plans.

*Annex #1:*

**The following issues need to be addressed in the Avar community:**

Infrastructural Development	Political and Sociat Rights	Rights to Language, Culture, and Education
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Drinking/irrigation water supply (in Tivi)<sup>28</sup></li> <li>● Improving internal roads</li> <li>● Creation of ambulatory near villages</li> <li>● Arrangement of transport connecting to the center</li> <li>● Construction of sports hall (in Chantliskure)</li> <li>● Support for connecting to Internet networks (in Tivi)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Study of issues with citizenship in the Avar community and search for solutions;</li> <li>● increasing the representation of the Avar community at the local self-government level;</li> <li>● Promoting the employment of Avar community members, especially young people, in public service;</li> <li>● Creating an inclusive consultation platform at the local level to support multicultural policy.</li> <li>● Elimination of historically created difficulties related to land resources (in Tiv, partially in Chantkliskure)</li> <li>● Strengthening programs aimed at economic empowerment of women</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Creation of a preschool education institution (in Chantliskure)</li> <li>● Creation of necessary programs and training classes to support the Avar culture at the self-government level;</li> <li>● Creation of cultural dialogue and multicultural cooperation programs and processes at the self-government level</li> <li>● Promoting the development of libraries and community centers in villages.</li> </ul>
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*Annex #2:*

**The following issues need to be addressed in the Udu community:**

<b>Infrastructural Development</b>	<b>Political and Sociat Rights</b>	<b>Rights to Language, Culture, and Education</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Opening of an ambulatory near the village of Zinobian</li> <li>● Solving the problem of drinking/irrigation water through effective communication with the population</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Increasing the representation of the Udi community at the local self-government level;</li> <li>● Promoting the employment of members of the Udi community, especially young people, in public service;</li> <li>● Creating an inclusive consultation platform at the local level to support multicultural policy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Supporting the issue of the Udi language preservation</li> <li>● Showcasing the identity of Udi and increasing its visibility at the local and national levels</li> <li>● Promotion of the development of ethno-tourism in the village</li> </ul>

<sup>28</sup> Note: Along the statements, the name of the village is indicated only if the specific need was only mentioned in a corresponding village. In other cases, the needs for all three villages (Tivi, Chantliskure, Saruso) are the same.