



Organization for Security and  
Co-operation in Europe  
Mission to Georgia

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Head of Mission

Tbilisi, 26 February 2009

Ms. Eka Zghuladze  
Deputy Minister  
Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia

*Dear Eka,*

As per our phone conversation earlier today, please find enclosed a copy of the background report on the situation of Ossetians in Georgia outside the former Autonomous District of South Ossetia.

The report was handed to the Greek Chairmanship to be used within the Geneva Discussion framework during last round. Although intended for distribution in such forum, it never was, as the issue of discrimination against Ossetians living in Georgia was not raised.

*See you soon!*

Yours Sincerely,

Ambassador Terhi Hakala

**Report on  
the situation of Ossetians in Georgia outside  
the former Autonomous District of South Ossetia**

**Background**

This Report was prepared by the OSCE Mission to Georgia in execution of the task given to it by the Second Working Group on IDPs and Refugees in the third round of Geneva discussions on Georgia held on 17-18 December 2008. The Report is based on information gathered through monitoring activities, open sources and interviews conducted with representatives of the Georgian Government, international governmental and non-governmental organisations, as well as local non-governmental organisations.

**Legal situation, minority rights, government's civil integration policy**

Georgia is an ethnically, culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse country where particular attention of the government is required for the development of a national minority. The Constitution guarantees the rights of persons belonging to national minorities and prohibits discrimination on ethnic or religious grounds. In the aftermath of the "Rose Revolution", full integration of all ethnic minorities in Georgia remains a continuous challenge for the current government.<sup>1</sup>

The Parliament ratified the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) on 13 October 2005, with effect from 1 April 2006. In 2005 the National Council on Civic Integration and Tolerance was established tasked to draft a National Civic Integration Strategy and an Action Plan in order to promote the integration of ethnic minorities into multi-ethnic Georgia. The five-year Action Plan will be shortly presented to the public.

Ethnic Minorities Council functions under the Public Defender since 2005. It brings 83 NGOs together different ethnic groups and organisations and works as a permanent council for consultation and collaboration between the central authorities and representatives of ethnic minorities. The Council deals with Media and Information, Education and Culture, Regional Integration and Conflict Prevention as well as Legal Issues. There is so far no Law on minorities in Georgia and Georgia has not yet signed and ratified the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages.

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<sup>1</sup> Report submitted by Georgia on 16 July 2007 to the Council of Europe on the implementation of the Framework Convention.

### **Ossetian population, distribution**

According to the 2002 census around 16 percent of Georgian citizens belong to national minorities. It counted only 38 000 Ossetians in Georgia outside the former Autonomous District of South Ossetia (ADoOS) which make up 0.9 percent of its total population (cf. to the Soviet census of 1989 according to which 164 000 Ossetians lived in Georgia including South Ossetia, of which 97 658 within Georgia outside the former ADoOS. The significant decrease of the ethnic Ossetian population started in the early 1990ies. The violence between 1990 and 1992 displaced around 60 000 Ossetians, the majority of whom now live outside Georgia (mostly in North Ossetia).<sup>2</sup> Some moved due to forcible eviction in parts of Georgia which remained otherwise largely peaceful during the conflict, while others were displaced as a direct consequence of fighting in and around South Ossetia. Ossetians inhabit mainly four districts of Shida Kartli region (Gori, Kaspi, Kareli, Khashuri – 13 383), Tbilisi (10 268), six districts of Kakheti region (6 109) and four districts of Mtskheta-Mtianeti region (3 977). Furthermore, Ossetians settle in smaller numbers in the regions of Racha-Lechkhumi Kvemo Svaneti (Oni), Samtskhe-Javakheti (Borjomi), Kvemo Kartli (Tetri Tskaro) and Imereti (Sachkhere).<sup>3</sup>

The IDP-population, both from the early nineties and from the recent conflict, includes mixed Georgian-Ossetian families. However, the Civil Registry Agency does not collect data according to the ethnicity of IDPs, hence the number of ethnic Ossetians among IDPs cannot be determined. No significant return of Ossetians displaced outside Georgia has so far taken place.

### **Stalled return and restitution process**

The Georgian government made a commitment to implement the right to return for victims of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict upon entering the Council of Europe in 1999. In 2004 the Georgian government took tentative steps to encourage return of Ossetians after President Saakashvili issued a decree allocating 197 000 USD to assist 25 Ossetian families to regain their pre-war homes in the Borjomi valley. Their houses were rehabilitated and refurbished, and some livestock and agriculture support was provided; nine received monetary compensation. The return and reintegration, however, was not sustainable. Due to the lack of appropriate access to (Russian language) education, dismal infrastructure and poor social services only five families remained in Georgia. General lack of employment prospects in Georgia – together with lack of Georgian language skills - further dampened the return of Ossetian refugees from Russia. Despite efforts by the Georgian government, property restitution issues remain pending.

Although a ‘Law on compensation, restitution and restoration of rights for the victims of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict’ was passed in December 2006, for various reasons its implementation stalled.

### **Cultural situation, degree of integration**

In general Ossetians living in Georgia outside the former ADoOS speak the state language. Most of them have their family names adapted decades ago by adding Georgian endings to them. Language tuition in native Ossetian currently exists in two schools in Lagodekhi district (4x45

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR, Population Movements as a Consequence of the Georgian-South Ossetian Conflict, updated 1 September 2004.

<sup>3</sup> European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI), ECMI briefing note on Ossetians in Georgia outside the former ADoOS, January 2009 (printout). Out of 59 villages in Shida Kartli region with Ossetian population 12 have substantial (more than 60 per cent) Ossetian population, out of 37 villages in Kakheti region 12 have substantial Ossetian population.

minutes per week from first to fourth grade, 3x45 minutes per week from fifth to eleventh grade). There is also one week-end school with tuition in Ossetian in Tbilisi. In the year 2002, 200 pupils were registered in Ossetian school departments. While it is being promoted by the state according to the 1997 law on education, Ossetian language tuition seems under threat by decreasing numbers of pupils and, consequently, school centralization. Public TV airs twenty-five minutes weekly news bulletin 'Moambe' in Ossetian language, and public radio five minutes daily news in Ossetian language (both along with other minority languages). While knowledge of Ossetian language is mainly preserved only within the elderly population (in Kakheti by trend even in younger generation), Ossetians still maintain their Ossetian ethnic identity.

Two Ossetian non-governmental organizations represent the interests of the Ossetian minority, the Ossetian Society in Georgia - 'Vsmaron' (brotherhood) and the Association of Ossetians of Georgia - 'Fidat' (friendship). Both organisations have difficulties to develop activities due to lack of funding and perhaps also certain lethargy. While Ossetians generally tend to keep a low political profile, the interviewed representatives of Ossetian minorities showed their frustration about the Georgian government's "repeated attempts to solve the South Ossetian conflict by force" entailing "negative psychological side-effects on the subjective feeling of security" for the Ossetian population in Georgia outside the former ADoOS . From the interviews one could certainly not get the impression of any discrimination against the ethnic minority of the Ossetians, however, the feeling of marginalisation seemed to prevail.

### **Stalled return and restitution process**

The Georgian Government made a commitment to implement the right to return for victims of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict upon entering the Council of Europe) in 1999.

In 2004 the Georgian Government took tentative steps to encourage return of Ossetians after President Saakashvili issued a decree allocating 197 000 USD to assist 25 Ossetian families to regain their pre-war homes in the Borjomi valley. Their houses were rehabilitated and refurbished, and some livestock and agriculture support was provided; nine families received monetary compensation. The return and reintegration, however, was not sustainable. Due to the lack of appropriate access to (Russian language) education, dismal infrastructure and almost non-existent social services only five of the 25 families that had returned remained in Georgia. General lack of employment prospects in Georgia – in some cases together with lack of Georgian language skills - further dampened the return of Ossetian refugees from the Russian Federation. Despite efforts by the Georgian Government, property restitution issues remain pending. Although a 'Law on compensation, restitution and restoration of rights for the victims of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict' was passed in December 2006, for various reasons its implementation stalled.

### **Cultural situation, degree of integration**

In general, Ossetians living in Georgia outside the former Autonomous District of South Ossetia speak the state language. Most of them even adapted their family names decades ago by adding Georgian endings to them. Native language tuition in Ossetian currently exists in two schools in Lagodekhi and one in Kvareli districts of Kakheti region, 4 x 45 minutes per week from the first to fourth grade and 3 x 45 minutes per week from the fifth to eleventh grade. There is also one week-end school with tuition in Ossetian in Tbilisi. 229 pupils are registered in Ossetian school departments all over Georgia. While being promoted by the state according to the 1997 law on

education, Ossetian language tuition seems under threat by decreasing numbers of pupils and, consequently, a decreasing number of schools caused by their merger.

The public TV airs a twenty-five minutes weekly news bulletin 'Moambe' in Ossetian language, and the public radio five minutes daily news in Ossetian language (both along with other minority languages). While knowledge of Ossetian language is mainly preserved within the elderly population – with the exception of Kakheti, where a trend of language preservation in younger generation exists – Ossetians still maintain their ethnic identity.

Two Ossetian non-governmental organizations represent the interests of the Ossetian minority, the Ossetian Society in Georgia - 'Vsmaron' (Brotherhood) and the Association of Ossetians of Georgia - 'Fidat' (Friendship). Both organisations have difficulties to develop activities due to lack of funding and perhaps also a certain degree of lethargy. While Ossetians generally tend to keep a low political profile, the interviewed representatives of Ossetian minorities showed their frustration about the Georgian Government's "repeated attempts to solve the South Ossetian conflict by force" that had "negative psychological side-effects on the subjective feeling of security" for the Ossetian population in Georgia outside the former ADoOS . From the interviews one could certainly not get the impression of any discrimination against Ossetians, however, one could not leave with the notion of a self-confident, society-constituent ethnic group either.

### **Human rights situation, allegations of ethnic discrimination**

While there have been numerous cases of discrimination against ethnic Ossetians in the nationalistic delusion of the early nineties (with several court cases still pending), subsequent Georgian Governments embarked on an integrative approach towards ethnic minorities. According to the independent Public Defender's Office, no recent individual cases of ethnic discrimination on the basis of affiliation to the Ossetian minority are known, nor rumours in this regard could be confirmed in interviews with locals, neither by the Public Defender's Office nor by ECMI. This assessment corresponds to information provided by UNHCR which is not aware of any recent cases of physical abuse, harassment or discrimination of ethnic Ossetians or of any ethnic cleansing policy or practice of the Government of Georgia that would have led to the displacement of ethnic Ossetians from Georgia.

Information provided to UNHCR by the de facto authorities in Tskhinvali that *prior* to the August 2008 war about 100 persons of primarily ethnic Ossetian origin had been registered as displaced persons from Georgia annually during the recent years, could not be verified due to the outbreak of hostilities. UNHCR, however, assumes that economic reasons, including significantly higher (Russian standard) pensions in South Ossetia, as well as family reasons, could have been among the often complex mixed motives causing the departure of ethnic Ossetians from Georgian controlled territory to the former Autonomous District of South Ossetia.

Contrary to initial concerns shared by human rights and humanitarian actors, the August 2008 war did not lead to a change of the situation of ethnic Ossetians in Georgian controlled territory or to their long-term displacement in any significant numbers. The population of ethnically mixed villages in the adjacent areas to the administrative boundary line of the former Autonomous District of South Ossetia has not raised any concerns over discrimination. On the contrary, first-hand reports testify to mutual support among neighbours of different ethnic background during wartime. Ethnic Ossetians to whom UNHCR had talked in collective centres had not raised concerns over discrimination either. The Representative of the UN-Secretary General on the Human Rights of IDPs, who visited Georgia in October 2008, met with persons of Ossetian ethnic

origin among IDPs, usually from mixed marriages, and could not identify concerns related to their ethnic origin. Inhabitants of the areas adjacent to the former Autonomous District of South Ossetia had insisted that there were no inter-ethnic problems between Georgians and Ossetians, because they often lived in mixed marriages.

## **Migration**

Ossetians in Georgia outside the former Autonomous District of South Ossetia usually maintain close relations with their relatives in the Russian Federation who had left Georgia forcedly in the early nineties. Traditionally, there has been frequent travel between both communities, which reportedly has been hampered by the visa regime which the Russia Federation introduced for Georgian citizens and subsequently by the suspended visa-processing due to the severed bilateral diplomatic relations. But even in cases, where Ossetians held both Russian Federation and Georgian passports, the closure of the border crossing point at Verkhni Lars (Georgian Military Highway) in 2006 resulted in costly detours (via Azerbaijan), making regular contacts among relatives more difficult and collection of higher Russian pensions in the Russian Federation for dual passport holders unprofitable.

According to information provided by ECMI there is a tendency among Ossetians of the Shida Kartli region to leave towards the Russian Federation. A general sense of insecurity out of fear of a new war in Georgia, as well as economic reasons, i.e. hard socio-economic conditions, might account for this emigration. Relations with Georgians, according to the local Ossetian population, are peaceful and remained unaffected by the recent war. Reports, according to which Ossetians living in villages adjacent to the administrative boundary line and having relatives in the former Autonomous District of South Ossetia would leave due to Georgian law enforcement pressure aimed at curbing cross-boundary line movement, could not be confirmed. UNHCR, together with its implementing partners, is going to closely monitor the situation in those villages adjacent to the administrative boundary line with Ossetian population. Despite peaceful coexistence with Georgians in the Kakheti region, there is a tendency of Ossetian migration to Vladikavkaz, which could be explained by a feeling of insecurity and better socio-economic conditions in North Ossetia/Russian Federation.<sup>4</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Ossetians in Georgia outside the former Autonomous District of South Ossetia are relatively well integrated into Georgian society, while at the same time maintaining their ethnic identity. Most of them speak the Georgian state language. Knowledge of the Ossetian language is mainly confined to the elderly, even if there are limited possibilities of Ossetian language education. Inter-ethnic relations between Georgians and Ossetians currently do not give reason for concern. The OSCE is not aware of any recent individual cases of ethnically motivated violence or discrimination, let alone a state policy of discrimination. However, Ossetians, like other national minorities, are underrepresented in Georgia's public life. Ossetians keep a low political profile and the conflict between the Georgian Government and the de facto authorities in Tskhinvali seems to negatively affect their subjective feeling of security. It is difficult to make reliable statements about current

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<sup>4</sup> Interviews conducted by ECMI in Ossetian villages did not prove rumours and reports on discrimination of Ossetians in Kakheti after the August 2008 war, though facts of selling houses and leaving for North Ossetia/Russian Federation after the war had been recorded in almost every Ossetian village. The reason for this was according to neighbours a not further defined 'factor of fear'. Allegedly, some Ossetians who had left Kakheti after the war had declared on forceful actions by the Georgian Government in order to benefit from asylum status in the Russian Federation.

migration movements of Ossetians to and from Georgia. However, there is a tendency among Ossetians (in Shida Kartli and Kakheti) to leave Georgia for the Russian Federation, the reason for which might be psychological (fear of a new outbreak of hostilities), as well as socio-economic (better living conditions in North Ossetia). The complex and mixed motives for such departures could only be clarified by an in-depth study.