

Human Rights Violations of Ethnic Azerbaijanis in Georgia

List of Themes

**COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION
(CERD)**

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Ilia State University was founded in 2006 as a result of a merger of six different academic institutions with long and varied histories. Currently, it is one of the leading research and educational institutions in Georgia. Representing a union of students and professors, ISU is a multifunctional educational and research institution offering a common space for academic and professional education and research with the joint efforts of its students, professors, teachers, and researchers. Human Rights Clinic aims to promote teaching and research in the area of human rights at the university level by raising academic awareness of pressing human rights issues, establishing a live-client Human Rights Clinic at Ilia State University, and delivering a human rights course for the students.

Salam Platform is a non-governmental organization established by ethnic/religious minorities of Georgia. The platform aims to organize non-dominant ethnic/religious groups for justice and equality. Organize them for preserving their identity, cultural heritage, language, and history. Salam platform aims to achieve equality for the most oppressed and marginalized groups in Georgia through self-organization, and build a society of solidarity free from patriarchy, ethnocentrism, racism, xenophobia, and economic oppression.

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I. Discrimination with respect to kindergarten, elementary schools, and secondary schools

The members of the Azerbaijani community living in Georgia face many barriers in public life. One of the biggest challenges for ethnic Azerbaijanis is a lack of knowledge of the official language. Communication problems have also been identified in institutions providing services necessary for the realization of social and economic rights of the different ethnic minorities, such as the Houses of Justice, territorial offices of the Social Service Agency, and branches of commercial banks.¹ The language barrier hinders the social integration of the members of the Azerbaijani community. The problem begins from the early stage. Steps taken by the state are not sufficient to ensure quality and equal access to pre-school and secondary education. The qualification of teachers and the lack of a unified vision for their training remain critically problematic.² There are some densely populated villages without kindergartens and quality numbers of schools.

According to a multiple indicator cluster survey conducted in 2018 by the national statistics office GEO stat and the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health with UNICEF support, the total enrollment of preschool children between the ages of three and five was 82 percent. Enrollment rates were lower for children of ethnic minorities (the rate for Azeri children was 28.8 percent, while the rate for Armenian children was 68.8 percent) as well as children from socially vulnerable groups (poor or large families, single parent families, IDPs, families with persons with disabilities) (63.6 percent) and rural communities (70.2 percent).³

¹ Public Defender (Ombudsperson) of Georgia, Special Report on Situation of Equality and Combating and Preventing Discrimination, 2022, p. 21, see: <https://www.ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2022022413261538101.pdf>

² Public Defender (Ombudsperson) of Georgia, Report on the Situation of Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia, 2021, p. 321, see: <https://www.ombudsman.ge/res/docs/2021070814020446986.pdf>

³ U.S Department of State, 2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Georgia, see: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/georgia/>

II. Access to Education, through the failure to provide opportunities for proficiency in the official⁴ language and language barriers

Access to higher education is even more challenging. Through the years Georgia managed to establish Georgian language training programs, one of them and maybe the most popular one is known as the “1+4” program, which aims to teach the official language of Georgia to students of national minorities who cannot speak Georgian. The “1+ 4” program is a university-level program, in which students from the ethnic, and linguistic minorities who do speak the national language can enter the university on a five-year basis, in which the first year is devoted exclusively to instruction in the Georgian language, after which they pursue the normal four years of university.

There is no doubt program is an important one, but its effectiveness is very limited due to the low level of funding provided by the State. The high cost of the program and the generally low socio-economic status of Azerbaijani students make participation in this program virtually impossible for students whose costs are not covered by the State.

III. Name Change

The family names of ethnic Azerbaijanis in Georgia typically end with the Russian Suffixes – ov, -ova, -ev, -eva. These surnames with Russian suffixes were given in the 1840s under the Russian Empire and especially during the Soviet Union.⁵ Although Georgian law allows for changes of surnames in some circumstances, it does not permit such changes in the circumstances of the Azerbaijani community, thus discriminating against the Azerbaijani community. To change one’s surname, a person needs documentary proof of their ancestor’s use of their preferred surname. But Georgian civil registry archives do not have data on family names dating back to the pre-Soviet period.

⁴ According to Article 2 of the constitution of Georgia, “the official language of Georgia shall be Georgian, and, in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, also Abkhazian.”

⁵ For further information see: <https://www.facebook.com/SalamPlatform/videos/2782068378717113/>

In August 2021, the members of Platform Salam organized an advocacy campaign #ReturnMySurname, in which they demanded to have the Russian endings of their surnames changed to Azerbaijani endings. For this campaign, the activists started collecting signatures to support a bill that would allow ethnic Azerbaijanis and other ethnic groups to remove or Alter Russian endings from their last names. As a result, “Salam” collected about 27,000 signatures. However, on November 8, 2021, the Bureau of the Parliament of Georgia refused to accept the signatures to initiate the bill. In May 2022, the Parliament of Georgia prepared an alternative bill on the right to change surnames that have non-authentic, non-historical suffixes, the proposed bill has several serious shortcomings. It must be noted, that the bill was developed in a “closed door” manner, with no involvement of the Azerbaijani community.

IV. Political Participation

The Azerbaijani community, whose members are predominantly Muslim, faces multiple forms of discrimination and social stigma. Additionally, the dominant discourse perceives ethnic and linguistic minorities as a potential national security threat.⁶ As a result, the members of the Azerbaijani community are excluded from both policy and decision-making processes and often become instrumentalized by political parties and leaders. Furthermore, the interests of ethnic Azerbaijanis are not represented by Georgian political parties. For instance, the analysis of the parties’ pre-election perspectives for the Parliamentary elections 2020 shows that most of their programs do not single out the issue of ethnic minorities in separate chapters or subchapters.⁷

V. Right to health, reproductive and sexual rights

Ethnic Azerbaijanis in rural areas are not able to enjoy the right to health equally for multiple reasons. First, the realization of this right in Georgia is problematic even in cases directly guaranteed by law. As a

⁶ Open Society Georgia Fund, *Ultranationalist Narrative of Online Groups in Georgia*, 2019, p. 44, see: <https://osgf.ge/en/publication/ultranationalist-narrative-of-online-groups-in-georgia/>

⁷ Social Justice Center, *Equality Policy in the Parties’ Pre-election Perspectives – 2020*, p. 4, see: https://socialjustice.org.ge/uploads/products/pdf/Equality_in_Political_Parties_Programs_1606809839.pdf

result, in municipalities where the knowledge of the official language is low, it creates barriers to accessing social and healthcare services. What's more, due to infrastructural problems (road, transportation, lack of hospitals and pharmacies in the regions) the most vulnerable people within the Azerbaijani ethnic communities, including women and people with disabilities, are only able to travel to the regional center of Tbilisi for the most urgent medical needs.⁸

Despite calling for some effective rapid actions to provide information about gender issues, and sexual and reproductive rights, the state does not have the political will to make any changes. Information about sexual and reproductive health is not provided at schools. Low levels of awareness about sexual and reproductive health, as well as services, are the main concerns. These problems have a particularly severe impact on ethnic minority women, as they are "much more likely to be victims of various forms of violence".⁹

VI. Environmental Justice Issues

Ethnic Azerbaijanis in rural areas face serious environmental problems. Air pollution and severe shortages of drinkable water have been major challenges. Since ethnic minorities often are not considered equal citizens, they are disproportionately affected by climate change. The Azerbaijani village of Savaneti (Bolnisi Municipality), with a population of more than 1,400, is highly affected by a local industrial-scale chicken factory called "Savaneti". Without effective safety inspections, the factory causes major problems for the local population, which manifests in frequent poisonings and diseases. The village of Mushevani (Bolnisi Municipality), which is another Azerbaijani village (99% of the population is ethnic Azerbaijani), is also under threat of socio-ecologic catastrophe, due to the proposed expansion of mining by JSC RMG Copper, a mining company. Local people are fearful that the process of gold, silver, and copper mining by JSC RMG Copper in their village will cause serious damage both to their cultural

⁸ Report of the Coalition for Equality and other NGOs to the Pre-sessional Working Group of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 81th Session, p. 9, see:

[http://www.equalitycoalition.ge/files/shares/Coalition for Equality - CEDAW Report - June 16 2021.pdf](http://www.equalitycoalition.ge/files/shares/Coalition%20for%20Equality%20-%20CEDAW%20Report%20-%20June%2016%202021.pdf)

⁹ Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO), 2021, p. 14, see:

[http://www.equalitycoalition.ge/files/shares/Coalition For Equality Report Georgia.pdf](http://www.equalitycoalition.ge/files/shares/Coalition%20For%20Equality%20Report%20Georgia.pdf)

heritage and to biodiversity. The local Azerbaijani community strongly opposes JSC RMG Copper expanding into their village.