

**Alternative report
On Georgia’s implementation of the
UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
in connection with consideration of Georgia’s 8th-11th periodic reports**

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The Situation of Roma and Roma-like Groups in Georgia

Context

Georgia’s antidiscrimination laws are quite advanced. They include the comprehensive law “On the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination” (2014) and provisions banning discrimination in other laws (“On Public Health” (Art. 6.1), “On Patient Rights” (Art. 6.1), “On General Education” (Art. 13.3), “On Higher Education” (Art. 3.2), and general and special provisions on penalties for racial discrimination and violation of equal rights in the Criminal Code). At the same time, implementation of the antidiscrimination law and the corresponding state programs in practice leaves much to be desired. This is primarily because the antidiscrimination law itself does not specify concrete actions the government should take to eliminate discrimination or effective mechanisms for executing antidiscrimination measures. It also lacks a mechanism for punishing discriminatory acts.

As part of the law’s implementation, the Georgian government adopted the State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration and Action Plan for 2015-2020, which led to significant success, particularly in getting the Roma population documented. However, because the government lacks financial resources and is not that invested in protecting other minority rights, most initiatives in this area continue to be developed by the communities themselves, nongovernmental organizations, and activists interested in supporting them.

Ethnic minorities living in Georgia continue to face discrimination in various areas of life, which results in widespread poverty and social vulnerability, particularly given Georgia’s generally complex economic situation. According to [UNICEF \(2017\)](#), in Georgia 19.6 percent of landowners, 21.7 percent of the population, 27.6 percent of children, and 17. percent of retirees live below the aggregate poverty line. The level of child poverty is higher in families that have household plots, i.e., among the rural population; one out of every five children lives in a household where minimum needs are not met. The 2019 NDI/CRRC [study](#) “Public Attitudes in Georgia” showed that 61 percent of respondents did not consider themselves employed; this figure reached 78 percent in ethnic settlements and 68 percent in rural localities. Fifty-four percent of respondents believed that they could not take out loans of 300 lari without interest. Of the total number of respondents, 54 percent took out loans; this figure stood at 61 percent in ethnic settlements. Eighty-eight percent of respondents had no savings whatsoever, while this figure reached 94 percent in rural areas.

One of the factors that creates a foundation for discrimination is the predominance of various cultural and social stereotypes about ethnic minorities. The concept of Georgia’s civic nation is founded on the narrow

religious and ethnic identity of Orthodoxy and the Georgian ethnicity. This means that the rights of religious-ethnic minorities are violated in Georgia (see [the report](#) of Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Dunja Mijatović following a visit to Georgia in 2022).

Islam is professed by most ethnic Azerbaijanis, who make up almost seven percent of Georgia's population (about 233,000 people), Chechen-Kisti (5,697 people, according to the 2014 census), Lezgins, Ahiska Turks (Meskhetian Turks), and partly Abkhazians and some Georgian ethnographic groups (Adzhars and Meskhetians). This means that there is an ethnic dimension to violations of the right to freedom of religious belief. These violations include discriminatory refusals to build mosques and disdain for Muslim cultural heritage.

A large Azerbaijani community that professes Islam is trying to obtain a permit to build a mosque in the village of Akhlo-Lalalo (municipality of Marneuli), but the local government is prohibiting construction under various pretexts.

A [conflict](#) between Batumi's Muslim community and the city government over denial of a permit to build a mosque has been ongoing since 2016. The existing Batumi Central Mosque is small and cannot accommodate all believers, so Muslims have to pray under the open sky. The Public Interest Group to Build a Mosque in Batumi has collected signatures from over 12,000 citizens and appealed to the Adjara government, the Batumi mayor's office, and the Georgian government, but both local and central governments have denied the request. According to members of the Muslim community, several Orthodox churches are currently under construction and operating in the same zone where the permit to build the mosque was not granted. Discrimination in this case was established by the Batumi City Court (September 30, 2019) and upheld by the Kutaisi Court of Appeals (April 13, 2021), but Batumi's Muslim community has not yet received a permit to build a mosque.

The mosque in Mokhe (Adigeni municipality in the south of Georgia), has been used as a warehouse, a library, and a club since 1957 and has been owned by the local government since 2007. In 2014, the authorities decided to turn the mosque building into a library. The village's Muslim community asked the municipality to either preserve or renovate the building. In late October 2014, almost 100 people came out to protest this decision. The police arrested 14 people, four of whom became claimants in a case and accused law enforcement bodies of using physical and psychological violence and discriminatory insults. The complaint also says that a criminal case against police officers who used unjustified force against the people arrested during the investigation was not opened, even though many witnesses identified the officers as participants in the violence. In 2021, the European Court of Human Rights [found](#) that Georgia was guilty of discriminatory and inhuman treatment in relation to the four claimants (case [54217/16](#) Teimuraz Mikeladze and Others v. Georgia).

In March 2022, Georgia began accepting tens of thousands of refugees, both Ukrainian citizens fleeing Russia's military aggression and Russian citizens, including persecuted activists, oppositionists, anyone subject to the risk of forced mobilization, and anyone with antiwar convictions. The challenges of this mass migration include a heavy load on the country's social and educational systems and growing risks of xenophobia and discrimination.

The situation of Roma and Roma-like groups (Lom/Bosha and Dom people)

Roma live in many localities in Georgia, in most cases among the ethnic majority, and, less often, as small groups in dense settlements. Data on their numbers in Georgia is not exact due to constant internal and external migration: Human Rights House cites official data from 2015 showing that there are almost 1,500 [registered](#) members of Roma groups. The Institute of Tolerance and Diversity, which has worked with Georgia's Roma community for over 10 years, [reports](#) that, according to the most recent official data, 604 Romani people are living in Georgia (these data are cited in the state's report to UN CERD). Nongovernmental organizations think that this number might be closer to 3,000 people.

Georgia's *Roma community* includes two main subgroups – the Vlachs and the Crymy. The Crymy live in western Georgia, in Kutaisi (in the settlement of Gelauri) and Batumi. The Vlachs live in eastern Georgia, in Gachiana (with several families from the Plashuni Roma group), in the village of Choeti (Leninovka) in the municipality of Dedoplistskaro (Kakheti), and in Telavi. Members of various Romani groups live in Georgia's capital, Tbilisi (mainly near the Navtlugi market in Samgori District); some are refugees from Abkhazia and others have moved there from Kutaisi. Some residents of Samgori appear there seasonally.

The Armenian-speaking group of *Lom/Bosha* mainly lives in Akhalkalaki, a town in Samtskhe–Javakheti region. They have almost fully assimilated with the Armenian community and often don't speak openly about their identity.

Members of the *Dom* community – mostly women and children – can be found panhandling on the streets of Georgian cities (Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Batumi). They differ from Romani and Lom groups in terms of language, culture, and religion and often portray themselves as Kurds. This is why Roma and Lom people do not associate themselves with the Dom. The Dom live among the Azerbaijani population in Marneuli, Bolnisi, and Dmanisi (the historical province of Borchali, which is now Kvemo Kartli) and periodically travel to Tbilisi and Kutaisi for work in the shadow economy. Many of them are seasonal migrants from Azerbaijan, where they live in districts bordering Georgia.

Roma groups in countries of the South Caucasus have specific problems that are typical of Roma communities in the Eurasia region. These include a low level of education, extreme poverty, poor socioeconomic support, harmful traditional practices (early arranged marriages, exploitation of children (participation in panhandling, housework, work outside the home like collecting scrap metal, selling at the market, and so forth)), and multi-discrimination against women and girls. Here is how a Roma man from Kobuleti describes this situation:

“The parents of most children work as yard keepers or go to sell at the market. They all leave the house very early. Yard keepers must be at work around 5 a.m., while women who sell at the market have to leave in the morning for the warehouse, where they stock up on goods, and then travel to the market. Their most important task is to feed their children, so school is not a priority. They leave the children sleeping alone at home, and the children don't go to school at all. When a child stops attending school, the school just ignores this. As a result, our children miss the material and can't catch up when their parents remember that their children attend school. This is why children normally only attend school until 4th grade at the most. After that, most of them don't go to school. And this leads to unemployment. Roma aren't hired for any jobs other than yard keepers. Many of us know how to drive and have licenses, but no one works as a driver: People won't ride with you because you are Romani. One Roma woman trained to be a hairdresser. She worked in a local beauty salon, but she lost her job a year ago because the salon closed, and now she's not working.” (Interview with ADC Memorial, 2022)

The living conditions of Roma communities in cities are much more favorable. For example, almost all Roma in Samgori (a district of Tbilisi) live in rented apartments that have gas, water, and electricity. Most women and men work at the market, where they sell clothes, shoes, or perfumes. Some men earn a living collecting and selling scrap metal. Other men periodically work building private homes. In Kobuleti, many Roma work as yard keepers. Nevertheless, panhandling and fortune telling are common occupations for women.

Everyone in Tbilisi's Roma community received passports several years ago and therefore has access to social and medical assistance. Young women who received documents try to give birth in clinics, but there are also cases of home births, which makes it difficult to obtain documents for the children.

The situation of Roma living outside the capital is much worse. They often lack the necessary living conditions. In Kutaisi, where Roma live in the Avangard District, several buildings had issues with gas, electricity, and water. Some buildings are not registered. Our respondents complained that the local government is passive and has no interest in solving the Roma community's problems:

“I live in my own house, which I bought 15 years ago. But I wasn't able to register it correctly because I'm illiterate. Our deputy agreed to help me several years ago. I gave his assistant the house register and the power of attorney I used to buy the house. But he disappeared after some time, and the documents disappeared with him. The house remained unregistered. That's why they won't lay gas lines and there's no heat, so in the winter I have to install a potbelly stove. The house is not connected to electricity lines. There's running water, but they haven't turned it off out of pity. I have appealed to our administration several times, but I haven't gotten anywhere. I'm illiterate, so I can't do anything myself, and they don't want to help.” (Roma man, resident of Avangard District, Kutaisi. Interview with ADC Memorial, 2022)

The failure to receive a quality education remains an acute problem for Romani children. Even though the Georgian law “On General Education” enshrines the right to a full general education, most Romani

children continue to be left on the sidelines of the education process. This is in many ways due to the fact that Roma do not know the Georgian language well. Children speak the language of their ethnic group or Russian at home, and they do not attend nurseries or preschools, so they arrive at school without basic knowledge or language skills.

“Conversation is difficult for them, because they do not know the state language. Society is not accountable to them, and they do not feel accountable to anyone. I think that society is poorly informed about who the Roma are and what kind of culture they have,” [said](#) human rights defender Leila Tskitishvili.

A preschool education could be the solution to this problem. However, parents’ lack of financial resources and the tradition of raising children at home are barriers to this, particularly because Roma are alienated and fear animosity and xenophobia:

“We promised the Roma living on Gudarekhi Street (Samgori District, Tbilisi) that we would enroll their children in preschool. But Georgian parents were strongly against this. They didn’t want Roma next to their children, because there are too many stereotypes about them,” [said](#) human rights defender Eka Kobesashvili.

Several Georgian general education schools have a so-called “Russian sector,” i.e. classes with instruction in the Russian language, but these schools are not accessible to Roma communities because they are too far away.

Teachers who work with Romani children say that Georgia does not have specialized courses for teachers who teach non-native speakers, which means that teachers do not have the correct approach to teaching these children:

P., a nine-year-old Romani girl from Kutaisi, attended School No. 38 for two years. She did not know Georgian, and her teachers did not know Russian. Lacking any special training, they treated her the same way they treated children who knew Georgian. P. said that she loved going to school and that her teachers loved her, but that she didn’t understand anything at all in her classes. Her parents transferred her to School No. 15 after second grade because it offered instruction in Russian. But the school closed for quarantine because of COVID-19 five days after classes started. Like all the other children, P. just sat at home for some time. Then teachers started coming to her home, but classes were discontinued because the teachers did not speak Russian. P. does not currently attend school. She does not know Georgian and is not able to read, write, or count in that language.

On August 17, 2015, the government approved the State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration and Action Plan for 2015-2020 on the basis of Resolution No. 1740. One of the plan’s strategic goals was for “minorities to receive a quality education accessible to all levels of residents and to improve knowledge of the state language.” The Strategy views the question of speaking the state language as one of the main tools for accomplishing the process of civic integration. However, the government’s efforts toward linguistic integration have clearly been insufficient in the case of the Roma minority: Unable to overcome the language problem, most Romani children leave school after the lower grades.

For example, dozens of Romani children attend the schools we visited in 2022 (School No. 5 in Gelauri, Kobuleti; School No. 3 in Rustavi; School Nos. 29 and 38 in Kutaisi; School No. 29 in Tbilisi), but only a handful move on to higher grades from the lower grades. According to teachers, children are usually interested when they enter 1st grade and attend classes regularly, but the problems start in 2nd grade with children oversleeping, refusing to go to school, and not completing their homework. The children who stay on at school do not generally perform well.

Right now, almost 60 Romani children attend School No. 5 in the settlement of Gelauri in Kobuleti. Of these, only two are in 12th grade. They put in a lot of effort and consistently do well. The remaining children have poor attendance and have a hard time mastering the school program.

According to the principal of School No. 3 in Rustavi, only a few of the Romani children attend school up to 9th grade, since for most parents “the most important thing is for a child to learn how to count and write.” We saw many children when we visited the Roma settlement in Gachiani, whose children are zoned for School No. 3. To the question of whether they attend school, most of them responded that they only completed elementary school and then stopped attending classes.

We observed a similar situation in Kutaisi schools. Twelve Romani children attend School No. 29: Two children are in 2nd grade, one is in 4th grade, three are in 5th grade, one is in 8th grade, and four are in 9th grade. In 2021, only one Romani student graduated from 12th grade. No one graduated from 9th grade. This year there are no Romani children in the upper grades. According to the school's deputy principle, girls generally attend school through 7th grade, and then their parents take them out and give them away in marriage. Boys generally attend school through 9th grade, but only a handful make it this far. She also said that none of the children get good grades.

“Every year, about six to 10 Romani children consistently come to 1st grade. Sometimes they are different ages. Unfortunately, they stop coming after they learn to count and write. The girls stop coming sometime after 6th grade, because their parents force them to take care of their younger siblings. Boys attend school for longer, but not all of them. Many say they can't come to school because they don't have school supplies or shoes and that their parents don't have money for this. Some are ashamed that they get bad grades because they don't know the material or the Georgian language. Romani children are particularly sensitive. As soon as a teacher shows even the slightest bit of callousness to a Romani child, that's it, they stop coming to school and become extremely offended. But I do believe that many don't attend because their parents don't have money. Even though the school provides all children with textbooks, not everyone has money for notebooks, book bags, and clothes.” (teacher at a school Romani children attend. Interview with ADC Memorial, 2022)

Other reasons why education is interrupted include economic difficulties in Romani families occupied with survival and the associated fact that children start working at a young age to the detriment of education. In explaining the low level of Romani children's engagement in education, the authorities and school staff members usually cite “Romani traditions” as the reason why Romani parents are not interested in their children's educations.

However, the authorities' efforts to keep Romani children in school leave much to be desired. During our field study (April to June 2022), we found that only one Georgian school (No. 5 in Kobuleti) had a special integration program for Romani children, which included extracurricular classes and clubs. These classes give even children who have stopped attending school classes the chance to acquire skills in several subjects. For many children from Kobuleti's Romani community, these classes have become their only chance for studying since they do not know the Georgian language and cannot master the regular school program. The remaining schools do not have any programs like this because of low attendance rates among Romani children and the catastrophically small number of children who make it to the upper grades.

School No. 5 in Kobuleti is participating in the Ministry of Education's **integration project “Let's Do Something Interesting,”** which is targeted at national minorities. The program includes various supplemental classes for children at the school. In 2022, it included math, Georgian, and English classes, a dance club, and a soccer club. Both Romani and Georgian children attend these classes.

The project involved a theater club until 2021. Under the guidance of a paid director, the children prepared a theatrical production, which they put on at several theater festivals in Kutaisi and Batumi over the course of two years. After the club closed, the school continued to put on this production for various holidays.

During our visit to the school, we learned that only one of the 10 boys in the class attended the regular school classes. The rest only attended the project's classes. When asked why they didn't attend regular classes, some of the boys said that they didn't have normal shoes, book bags, or the required school supplies. In addition, when they came to school, they were not able to speak Georgian and did not understand most of the school program. It became even more difficult for them to learn the program in the upper grades, so they decided to attend only the project's classes, which are held in Russian.

In cases when children stop attending school, the administration must take measures to ascertain the reason for the absence and to bring the child back to school. However, teachers usually prefer not to disclose these cases because they fear being held responsible:

“Generally, when a child stops coming to school, we are supposed to call the parents first. Then, if that doesn't help, we send parents a written notification with the principal's signature and the school's seal. If this doesn't help, we are supposed to get in touch with social services, and then they start their work. But this is a very sensitive topic for both teachers and principals, because the principal

has to admonish the child's homeroom teacher, and then the Department of Education could start reprimanding the principal, and no one needs this. So we have almost no cases like this. We had one Romani student who disappeared. There was a long investigation into where he went. There were a lot of problems. Then he was found in Tbilisi. He was walking around the streets panhandling. Many of them are panhandling.” (assistant principal of School No. 5, Kobuleti. Interview with ADC Memorial, 2022)

School staff often justify their passivity by saying that they can do nothing to counter the will of parents who are not interested in continuing their child's education:

“The school has no reaction whatsoever when Romani children stop attending. Parents don't want them to attend, and we can't force them (assistant principal of School No. 29 in Kutaisi. Interview with ADC Memorial, 2022)

Municipal child protection services can also be passive and fail to coordinate their actions:

“I think the main reason why Romani children leave school early and don't graduate is lack of initiative on the part of municipalities. Each municipal district should have a list of school-age children for each locality, and the municipal authorities should act through social workers to make sure that all children go to school. If children don't want to go to school, a social worker should work with parents to resolve the problem. But municipalities generally have no time for Romani people.” (vice-principal for educational work at School No. 3 in Rustavi)

Harmful practices like exploitation and early and forced marriages are a consequence of poor school attendance by Romani children. According to a poll we conducted of Romani people in various regions of Georgia, the average age of marriage among respondents ranged from 13 to 15. In Kutaisi, a community leader said that marriage at the age of 13 to 14 is considered the norm for girls in Romani communities:

“It is usually rare to see girls in school, because studying is not a woman's affair. Our traditions are that they are not allowed to study. They get married early. For example, one of my granddaughters got married at 14. She gave birth to her first child at 15. My second granddaughter got married at 13. She gave birth at 14. She is now 19 and has three children. And that's pretty much what it's like in all families. In the family, girls must get up before everyone else, prepare something to eat, and make coffee. They are not allowed to wear pants or jeans. All the girls go to school dressed like that. After school, all our girls want to wear these clothes too, but this is shameful for us.” (leader of a Roma community in Avangard District, Kutaisi. Interview with ADC Memorial, 2022)

Children cannot withstand pressure from the community without outside support:

“Girls usually stop studying earlier than boys, because they either have to watch their younger siblings or get married. Boys also stop going to school at a young age, mainly after they learn how to count and write. We help our parents collect scrap metal and beg. But girls still stop attending school earlier. When I went to school, there were only three of us – me, my brother, and our sister. The rest of the children didn't go to school.” (boy from the Romani community in the settlement of Avangard, Kutaisi. Interview with ADC Memorial, 2022)

According to Article 1108 of Georgia's Civil Code, people 18 and over may get married. People 16 and over may get married with their guardian's consent. However, no one monitors this norm in the Roma community, and state agencies do not do anything about this problem, even though they are aware of it. Yelena Proshikiyan, an activist who helps Roma get passports, [said](#) that parents approve early marriages in most cases, but that girls do not want to get married: *“I have seen two cases when a girl ran away from home after our conversation because she did not want to get married. She was already 18, and she was ready to start studying, but in many cases girls' fates are decided by their parents.”* Yelena believes that at the municipal level, local police officers should work with such families and notify state agencies. These connections have not yet been established, though, and young women don't even know where to turn for help.

Recommendations

Take effective measures to implement antidiscrimination laws in practice.

Devote particular attention to the integration of ethnic groups arriving in Georgia as a result of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine: Prevent displays of xenophobia and discrimination on the basis of citizenship, create conditions for educating children in their native languages (Ukrainian, Russian), and discourage discrimination in the service sector.

Take measures to prevent discrimination against religious and ethnic communities, namely, ensure the right of Muslims to freedom of religion.

Adopt comprehensive, proactive measures to improve the situation of groups of Roma, Dom, and other Roma-like communities. Continue efforts to ensure that members of these groups have personal documents, that their children have access to a school education, that there is a standard for medical and social assistance, and that women and children are guaranteed protection from multiple discrimination and harmful traditional practices. Support the work of NGOs that provide assistance to vulnerable Roma groups.

Devote particular attention to the education of Romani people: Improve instruction for Romani children in school; ensure that all school-age children are included in education and advance from primary school to secondary school, completing at least 9th grade; encourage Roma to strive for a secondary professional education and a higher education; ensure that Romani children are effectively integrated into the preschool and school environments; provide conditions for preschool preparation of children, including enhanced language training in the preschool and elementary school programs; provide conditions for educating adults who never received an education for some reason.