

POLITICAL SCIENCES

THE ROLE OF THE GEORGIAN LANGUAGE IN THE INTEGRATION PROCESS OF ETHNIC MINORITIES IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Rtveladze T.

Graduate of MA at Ilia State University, Tbilisi, Georgia

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Abstract

Georgia's state policy, based on the principles of democracy, aims at protecting the rights of all ethnic Georgian citizens in a multicultural environment. The process of integration of ethnic minorities in Georgia has been ongoing for many years. The state language learning process is admitted as an essential tool of integration, portrayed through functioning of LEPL Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration.

The research highlights an importance of knowledge of the state language (Georgian) for the Azerbaijani and Armenian public servants and overviews the effectiveness of the LEPL Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration based on the evaluation and satisfaction of beneficiaries.

According to the results of the study, it became clear that ethnic minorities are still facing many challenges. Therefore, it is necessary to increase the quantity and quality of the state language learning programs to boost integration of ethnic minorities in economic, social and political life including the public sector employment.

Keywords: *Ethnic minorities, state language integration, state policy, public servant.*

Georgia is a multi-ethnic country with 13.2 percent of its population represented by ethnic minorities (National Statistics Office of Georgia 2018, 9). Representatives of the 10 most populous nationalities in the country speak a language different from the state language, Georgian. This is particularly evident in the densely populated regions of Georgia with ethnic minorities, such as Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti which are predominantly populated by ethnic Azeris (6.3 percent of the total population) and Armenians (4.5 percent of the total population) (National Statistics Office of Georgia 2018, 9).

Being a part of the Soviet Union ever since its creation has obstructed Georgia's political, cultural, economic life as well as ethno-linguistic policies hindering nation-building and national identity construction. Considering that the Russian language was favored in all the republics of the Soviet Union, up to now ethnic minorities do not exercise a good command of the Georgian language. As one of the reasons explains, small nations prioritized language to protect themselves from the language policy of the Soviet Union (Amirejibi and Gabunia 2021, 6).

The Rose Revolution in 2003 laid a solid background to the policy shifts towards deepening the integration of ethnic minorities by the launch of practicing effective state policies (Institute of social sciences and analysis 2011, 39). Restructuring the state policies have been solidified by developing a "National Integration and Tolerance Strategy" and later a "State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration". In addition, one of the initial and consistent steps were taken after 2006 by entering into force the European Convention for the protection of national minorities which boosted formulation of the state strategy (Institute of social sciences and analysis 2011, 39). For building democracies, the convention promotes the preservation of ethnic, linguistic and religious characteristics for national minorities, as

well as stimulates each of them to exercise their rights (Legislative Herald of Georgia 2006). In line with the above-mentioned international commitments, a number of changes have been made to Georgian legislation to protect ethnic minorities, their development and identity. Among them is the Law on State Language, which was adopted by the Parliament of Georgia in 2015, obliging all bodies, state or local self-governments to operate in Georgian language. (Legislative Herald of Georgia 2015). Article 5 of the law also obliges state and local self-governments to promote the functioning of the Georgian language, and according to Article 6, all public servants are required to know the Georgian language (Legislative Herald of Georgia 2015).

According to the State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration 2021-2030 action plan, "knowledge of the state language is one of the most important preconditions and a necessary factor for strengthening democratic process in the country" (State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration 2021-2030, 30). In this regard, the paper overviews the largest state language learning school, the LEPL Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration, with about 16 000 participants having successfully completed the Georgian Language course in 2015-2020. The school developed in 2005 aims at integration of public sector employees, including local self-governments, through learning the state language (LEPL Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration). According to the initial plan, "the curricula was devised exclusively for schoolchildren (in non-Georgian schools) and public servants" (State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration 2021-2030, 14). However, LEPL Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration "implements diverse programs for teaching the state language via 13 educational centers and 171 mobile groups" (State Strategy for Civic Equality and In-

tegration 2021-2030, 14). Participation of ethnic minorities has considerably increased in the programs of the LEPL Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration (State Strategy for Civic Equality and Integration 2021-2030, 21) However, the participation of ethnic minority public servants is low. Figure 1 shows that each year

the number of public servants in the state language course is quite declining. In 2014, the largest number, 380 civil servants, was recorded, while in 2019 - only 10, which represents a decrease of about 97.4 percent compared to 2014.

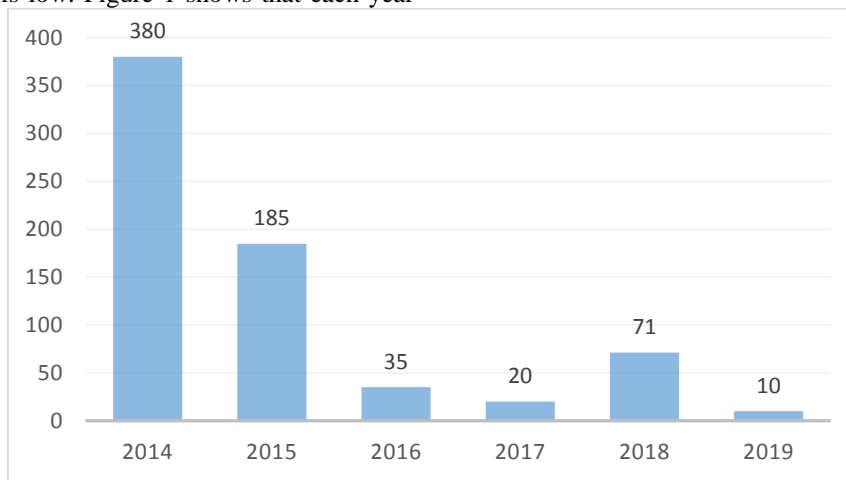


Figure 1: Distribution of public servants of the state language course

Source: The table is based on the information provided by LEPL Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration

As described in the National Concept for Tolerance and Civic Integration and the 2009-2014 Action Plan Assessment Document, LEPL Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration and Language Houses have been merged. Language houses had completely different goals from LEPL Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration school's initial goal (*Government of Georgia* 2014, 49). For this reason, it is also important to consider the proportion of public servants compared to other groups involved. Figure 2 clearly shows that in 2014, the involvement of a large number

of public servants accounted for 27.14% of the total, in 2015, 14.58%, in 2016, there was a sharp increase beyond public officials, and a significant decrease in the involvement of public servants directly. Given both facts, the number of public servants in 2016 was only 1.1% of the total number. In 2017-2018, a similar trend was maintained at 0.62% and 2.09%, respectively. 2019 was the year with the lowest rate of involvement of public servants, as well as its share in the total number, which amounted to only 0.28%.

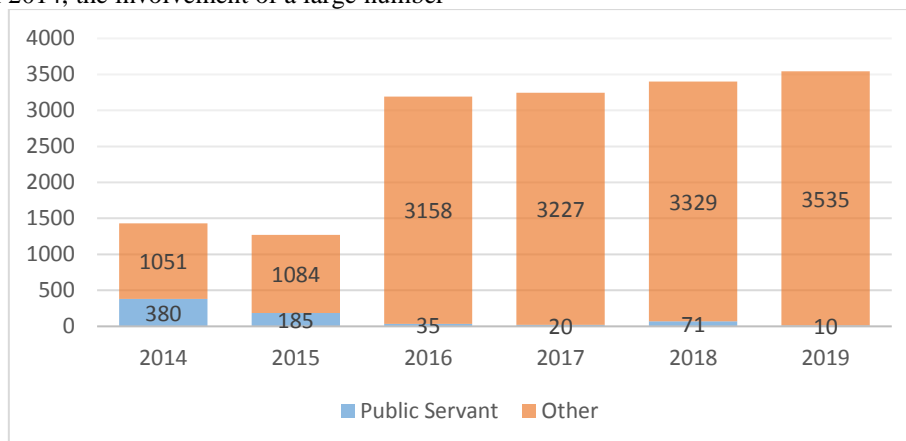


Figure 2: Statistics of the groups involved in the State Language Course

Source: The table is based on the information provided by LEPL Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration

The state policies of ethnic minorities in European countries also aim at increasing the level of integration of ethnic minorities in political and economic life. Given that there is no precise definition of "ethnic minority" in European countries either, Martin Kahanec et al define the ethnic minorities as of people with a foreign origin, including new and old migrants, national ethnic, linguistic, religious minorities, and stateless people. (Kahanec, Zaiceva, and Zimmermann 2010,6). Inadequate databases make it even more difficult to identify challenges of ethnic minorities in EU member

states (Kahanec, Zaiceva, and Zimmermann 2010,6). Therefore, the lack of accurate definition of ethnic minorities and a lack of data make it impossible to make a comparative analysis between countries on this issue. (Kahanec, Zaiceva, and Zimmermann 2010,6).

However, it is significant to review a few examples of state language policies in some European countries. Latvia with less than 60 percent of the population of ethnically Latvians, hosted many migrants from the Soviet Union in 1944-1990. (Zimmermann et al. 2008,

30). The majority of minorities are Eastern Slavs: Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians, who make up 35 percent of the population, while less than 2 percent are Jews, Roma, Armenians, Azeris, Tatars, and Uzbeks. (Zimmermann et al. 2008, 30). In terms of employment, labor market integration and high inclusion, the main focus falls on citizenship and the knowledge of the Latvian language, because language skills are one of the main requirements for employment. (Zimmermann et al. 2008, 31). This barrier leads to a small involvement of ethnic minorities in public administration (Zimmermann et al. 2008, 32).

Latvia has a multifaceted policy of public integration. Notable among them are Latvian language courses, which have significantly contributed to raising the level of education. The Latvian State Agency for Language Teaching makes a great contribution to the promotion of the language so that the population can learn the state language and be competitive in the employment market (Latvian Language Agency. 2005, 28).

In Germany, the growth of ethnic minorities began in the 1950s (Zimmermann et al, 2008, 28). Notable among them is the most numerous representation of Turks, amounting to about 3 million people (Smith and Eckardt 2018). Arriving in Cologne, Germany in 2008, the Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, addressed the German Turks, calling for the preserva-

tion of the Turkish language (Antelava 2012, 146), noting that "assimilation is a crime against humanity" (Press 2008). In his speech, Erdogan also called on Germany to open Turkish schools in Germany, while Turkey would have provided Turkish language teachers from Turkey. (Press 2008). However, the German Chancellor disagreed with this idea, on the contrary, she added that Turks living in Germany would only succeed if they learned the German language (Institute of the Middle East 2011).

The above-mentioned attitude by German Chancellor and the Latvian State policy confirms the fact that learning the state language is an essential tool for integration.

Before describing the results of the quantitative research, it is important to consider the demographic data of the public servants participating in the quantitative survey, which will facilitate the analysis and interpretation of the data. Fifty-two of the total number of responses are from public servants in Kvemo Kartli, and 48% are from public servants in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region. In both regions 56% live in cities and 44% in villages.

The participants of the study were divided into categories according to age and gender as follows: 18-25 years, belongs to 10% of the participants; 26-35 years, (55%); 36-45 years, (10%); 46-60 years, (21%), and 60+ years, (4%) of participants (Figure 1).

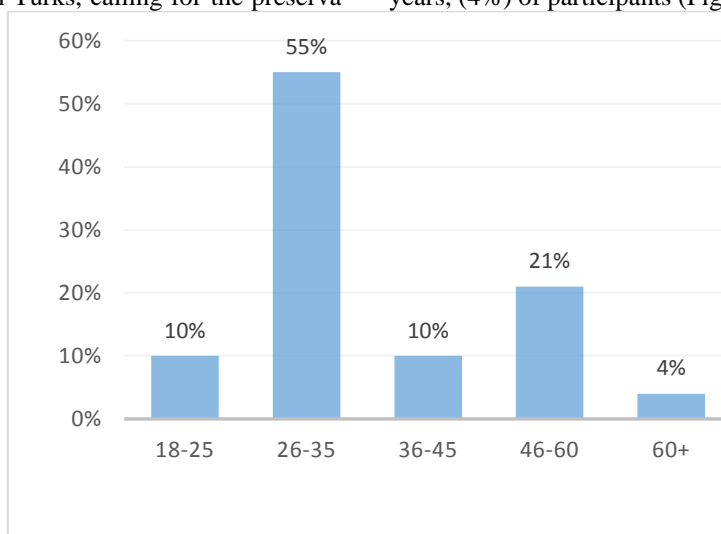


Figure 1: Age distribution of participants

Sixty three percent of participants are female and 37% are male. Fifty one percent of the participants speak Azerbaijani and 49% speak Armenian. The participant's proficiency level of the Georgian language, was assessed by the participants as follows: 17% of the participants (12 participants) speak the state language at the A2 level, 22.8% (16 participants) at the B1 level, 37.1% (26 participants) at the B2 level, and 22.8% (16 participants) at the C1 or higher language proficiency level. This distribution of language skills was indicated by the respondents' assessment and not by the officially

accepted language certificate, which may cause the data to not exactly match. Participants living in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region speak less Georgian than the participants from Kvemo Kartli (Figure 2).

Those who speak Georgian at the A2 level, are mostly from the Samtskhe-Javakheti region. The B1 level knowledge was identical in terms of the number of public servants participants, and the majority of participants with B2 and C1 levels or higher were from Kvemo Kartli.

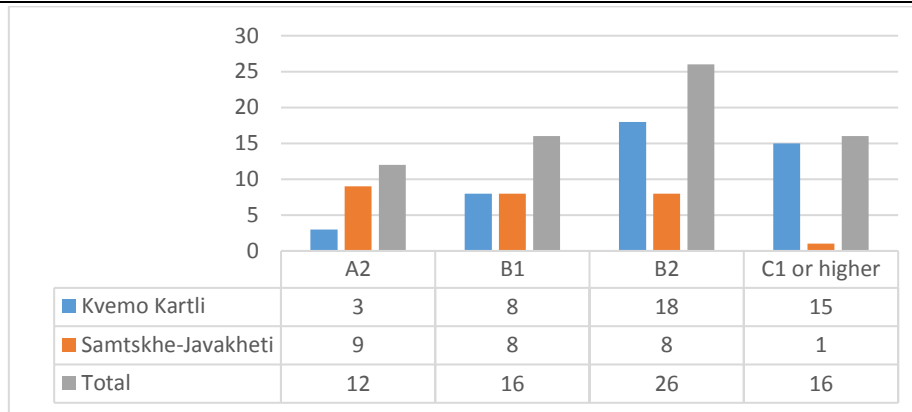


Figure 2: Distribution of Georgian language level of participants by regions

Participants also had the opportunity to indicate in the questionnaire the length of service in the public service according to six main categories as follows: 23% of participants had less than 1 year of experience in public service, 10% had 1-2 years of work experience, 35% had 3-5 years of experience, 19% had 6-10 years, 6% had 11-14 years and 8% had 15 or more years of experience.

I tried to find out how much the program helped each participant to learn the Georgian language. It is clear from the answers that the existing State Language and Integration Program of LEPL Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration was evaluated positively by the participants. In particular, 60% of the surveyed beneficiaries of the State Language and Integration Program stated that the program was very helpful, 35% said that the program more or less helped, and only 5% noted that this program did not help them learn or improve the Georgian language skills at all.

The participants indicated many positive aspects of the State Language and Integration Program. One positive factor was the variety course levels, which allows public servants to start learning or improving their Georgian language proficiency at the level needed. One of the motivating factors for learning the Georgian language at LEPL Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration School was the “certificate of successful completion” of a certain level presented by ethnic minorities to their employer. The impact of the state language learning program was positively assessed by the participants, especially by the staff of Marneuli Municipality.

Besides the benefits, the survey results highlight the following drawbacks. Since the LEPL Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration's school merged with language schools, the original goal of maximizing the inclusion of ethnic minorities in the civil service has been more or less weakened as the number of students has increased due to age and sectoral heterogeneity. The current reality is that the number of civil servants and ethnic minorities in the LEPL Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration School's state language course is declining every year.

The participants stated, that during the participation in the LEPL Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration, the ethnic minorities in Kutaisi were divided according to their ethnicity. An Armenian speaking male stated: **"The program was structured in a way that Armenian-speakers and Azerbaijani-speakers went through the program in Kutaisi during different periods"**. Kutaisi participants indicated that this was a big barrier to their learning since they had to speak Georgian only in the classroom. Moreover, the merging of LEPL Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration's school with language schools was also negatively reflected by the respondents. An Azerbaijani speaking female stated: **"After the increase in the number of students, the attention to public servants has decreased"**.

As a result, the Georgian government is taking significant measures to increase the integration of ethnic minorities through state language learning programs in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti. The state program in Georgia play a big role in the process of deepening the socialization of ethnic minorities. Nevertheless, there are many challenges facing ethnic minorities especially when members of ethnic minorities have little or no proficiency in the state language. This problem poses challenges to the full implementation of decentralization to the states with ethnically densely populated regions, of Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti.

As a result of the research, I received the following answers to the research questions of this paper:

Georgia takes significant steps forward to increase the integration of ethnic minorities from legislation to execution and implementation of state language teaching programs in Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti. In general, the attitude of the LEPL Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration beneficiaries is positive towards the program. Participants firmly evaluate the existing program. However, as the majority of participants noted, the merger of the program with language schools has negatively affected its core function. The most acute problem that emerged from the study is the number of existing programs. It is critical to increase, expand, and develop the Georgian language programs to improve the integration of the ethnic minorities in Georgia.

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