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## **MULTI-ETHNIC SOCIETY IN GEORGIA: A PRE-CONDITION FOR XENOPHOBIA OR AN ARENA FOR CULTURAL DIALOGUE?**

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The aim of this article is to examine the extent and nature of xenophobic attitudes among young people in Georgia. It asks how young people construct notions of 'us' and 'them' and of what is 'their own' and what is 'foreign' (or 'other'). It considers also whether the young people of Georgia simply reflect social trends inherent in the society around them, or whether they are more flexible, liberal and open to the outside world or, on the contrary, more rigid and critical than other members of society. Research focused on youth, and on the expression of ethnic and religious relations among young people in particular, remains in its infancy in Georgia. This paper thus provides an overview of that research on nationalism and ethnic and religious stereotypes current among Georgian youth that has been published to date. It goes on to outline the findings of original qualitative sociological analysis research carried out by the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development among students of higher education institutions in Tbilisi and young representatives of the Armenian ethnic minority in Samtskhe Dzhavakheti. Any profound understanding of these issues, however, requires their contextualisation in the ethno-political situation in Georgia and thus the article begins with a brief outline of the country's political situation and traces a multicultural 'map' of the country today.

### **Georgia's Multicultural 'Map'**

In order to examine Georgia's cultural diversity (and to delineate more precisely the markers of 'us' and 'them'), it is useful to provide an ethnic, linguistic and religious 'map' of the country. According to the census of 2002, the population of Georgia is around 4.3 million of whom 17% are ethnic minorities. This compares to 29% of a total population of 5.4 million at the time of the last Soviet census of 1989. The territories of Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia are both *de facto* independent but *de jure* counted as part of Georgia. Both have borders with Russia and are populated by Abkhazians and Ossetians, who speak Abkhaz and Ossetian. The most important ethnic minorities in Georgia in terms of their numbers are the Armenians (of whom there are

approximately 400,000 in Georgia as a whole) who are clustered in the region of Samtskhe Dzhavakheti (in the Southern part of Georgia close to the border with Turkey and Armenia) and the Azerbaijanis, for the most part Muslims (of whom there are 250,000 throughout Georgia as a whole), who are concentrated in the region of Kvemo Kartli (on the border with Azerbaijan and Armenia) (Otchety pervoi natsional'noi perepisi 2003).

Georgia is characterised by religious diversity. For instance, in the region of Samtskhe Dzhavakheti, the vast majority of Georgians are Orthodox Christians, and the majority of Armenians belong to the Armenian Apostolic (Gregorian) Church. However, there is a small number of Catholics among both the Georgians and the Armenians. Another religious ethnic group is the Russian Dukhobors, a religious sect, which settled in the region after leaving Russia in 1830-40. There has also been a small Jewish community in the region and, until 1944, there were many Muslims in Dzhavakheti – the so-called Meskhet or Meskhetian Turks (Iunusov 2000), who were deported in 1944 to Central Asia. Another important part of Georgia's multicultural map is the region of Adzharia - the Western part of the country on the Black Sea coast, bordering with Turkey - that is populated by Georgian Muslims.

There are several other small religious sects in Georgia: Baptists, Malakans, Dukhobors, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, Krishna-worshippers etc. There are also various groups that could be described as linguistic minorities (Svans, Mengrelians, Tsova-Tushin). However, the representatives of these groups consider themselves Georgians by nationality, and are identified as such by the rest of the country's population. Resident in the mountainous region of Georgia, in the Pankissi Gorge, on the border with Chechnya, are about 7,000 Kistin people (Muslims, related to the Vainakh peoples) who have also been assimilated into Georgian culture; they speak Georgian and have Georgian surnames (Tsulaia 2006). Following the military action in Chechnya, approximately 3,000 Chechen refugees appeared in Pankissi.

An important factor in the cultural identity of many of these groups is that they identify themselves on the basis of a combination of nationality, religion and language. For instance, it is generally thought that a Georgian must be an Orthodox Christian who speaks Georgian and an Armenian must be a Gregorian who speaks Armenian, and so on. This stereotypical approach to cultural identity is expressed in the famous Georgian slogan 'Language, Fatherland, Faith', despite the fact that there are Georgian Muslims and Georgian Catholics in the country (Nodia 1998).

In Soviet times, Russian was the language of international communication in Georgia, and to this day, it remains the country's *lingua franca* despite the best efforts of the Georgian authorities to instruct its citizens in the official state language of Georgian, no matter what their ethnic origin. Consequently, any 'dialogue' between cultures is frequently carried out in Russian.

The legislative structure in Georgia is built on the principles of racial tolerance. The Georgian constitution guarantees equal rights in social, cultural and political life to all citizens of the country, regardless of their ethnic origin or religious affiliation. Media and cultural institutions - schools, theatres, museums, newspapers - in the country continue to operate using the languages of ethnic minorities.

There remain, however, certain problems in relations between national groups. Since the break-up of the former Soviet Union, there has been a tendency in Georgia, as in other former Soviet republics, to construct a nation-state in which the titular nation dominates. The independent Georgia of the post-Soviet era, led by President Zviad Gamsakhurdia (1991), began to build a new state based on a mono-ethnic principle. The extreme nationalist position of the government and of certain sections of society is well illustrated by popular slogans of the time such as 'Georgia only for the Georgians' (Dzhavakhishvili & Frichova 2005). Against the background of the drive for independence, chauvinist rhetoric and extremist nationalism led to tensions in relations between ethnic groups and later to armed conflict in Southern Ossetia. The vast majority of ethnic minority citizens who emigrated from Georgia between the declaration of independence and the present day left the country at precisely this time.

When Eduard Shevardnadze assumed authority in 1992, another armed conflict flared

up in Abkhazia. During the years of Shevardnadze's presidency, the Georgian authorities did address the issue of ethnic minority rights and racial integration and the President's state-building policies emphasised civic rather than ethnic principles. However, in reality, the process of integrating national minorities went no further than declarations and assurances. For instance, the number of ethnic minority members among the deputies of the Georgian parliament in all its convocations and, likewise, in the administrative organs of its central executive committee is extremely small and in no way corresponds to the proportion they make up of the country's population as a whole.

In November 2003, there was another regime change in Georgia, ushered in by a wave of public protests against the corruption with which Shevardnadze's regime had come to be associated and against the falsifying of election results. This time, in the so-called 'Rose Revolution', the opposition managed to take power without any violent clashes with the existing authorities. In January 2004, the majority of the country's population voted for a new president, Mikhail Saakashvili, who had been at the forefront of the Rose Revolution. The new government also made an attempt to tackle the issue of ethnic minorities at an institutional level, introducing the new government post of State Minister for the Integration of Ethnic Minorities. With time, however, it became apparent that this measure had failed to bring about substantial change in the lives of people from ethnic minorities.

Arguably, despite efforts by the Georgian authorities at various times during the country's independent existence to create legal and institutional conditions which encourage the integration of ethnic minorities and the realisation of their rights, the country has yet to see real changes in the regulation of relations between nationalities. The general impression is that the state and the national majority do not trust ethnic minorities, suspecting them of separatist tendencies. For their part, minorities suspect the authorities and the national majority of intending, at best, to assimilate them, at worst, to force them out of the country or make them second-class citizens. It could be said that at the level of government, the relationship between those in power and the ethnic minorities fits perfectly into the 'us' and 'them', 'ours' and 'other' template.

### **Tolerance and Xenophobia in Georgian Society**

Georgians' own sense of themselves as one of the world's most tolerant peoples is closely associated with the historically evolved multicultural character of the country's capital city. Tbilisi is a cultural space where for centuries the representatives of various national and religious groups have lived in a multilingual environment, enjoying the benefits of mutual cultural enrichment. The various monuments representing diverse cultures, which stand side by side in the city's oldest district (the Orthodox Church, the Synagogue, the Mosque and the Armenian Church), are objects of pride for many Georgians, who see them as proof of their tolerant nature.

However, alongside Georgians' perception of themselves as tolerant, thrives the idea that Georgians are the country's 'hosts' (or owners) and all other peoples are 'guests', and that hosts and guests should behave accordingly. Moreover the Georgians' notion of their own tolerance betrays a perceptible sense of forbearance and a certain condescension towards those (as it were, 'less worthy') who are 'tolerated'.

There are a number of ethnic stereotypes – partly a legacy of the Soviet period – which still enjoy currency in present-day Georgian society, in which specific social roles are ascribed to particular ethnic groups, either in jokes or publications. For instance Azerbaijanis are typically identified as agricultural workers, Kurds as street-sweepers and rubbish collectors, Ossetians as policemen, Armenians as traders and artisans and Russians as employees in the service industry (Dzhavakhishvili & Frichova, 2005). Obviously, these attitudes reflect an element of social reality, but as with all stereotypes, such roles are generalised to every member of a given ethnic group.

It could be argued, moreover, that Georgians remain tolerant towards representatives of other nationalities only for as long as they conform to the stereotypical social roles ascribed to their ethnic group. For a certain section of Georgian society, if a representative of an ethnic minority steps 'outside' their prescribed role, and tries to 'move up a level', this tolerance gives way to hostility. This does not lead to the rejection of the principle of tolerance, but its reinterpretation; when a guest shows ingratitude it is acceptable to show intolerance. Thus, although perceptions of the

role in society of various ethnic groups have changed in many respects, the idea of the roles of 'host and guest' continue to dominate in the view of many 'ordinary' citizens.

What then, is the basis of this 'fear' felt by native Georgians? Why are they so apprehensive of the minorities they perceive as 'guests'? Why do they suspect them of separatism? According to two population censuses carried out in the Soviet era and in the era of independence, Georgians make up the majority of the country's population, 70% in 1989 and 84% in 2002. How far are the country's inhabitants aware of this fact and how do they perceive it?

According to the findings of a sociological survey conducted by the Business Consulting Centre<sup>ii</sup>, a significant proportion of Georgians who responded to the survey (20%) consider that Georgians are in the minority in the country and that other ethnic groups make up 60% of the population. Accordingly, they perceive that there is a danger that Georgian culture will be lost. Only a small number of those who took part in the survey (15%) demonstrated an accurate grasp of the situation, maintaining that other ethnic groups make up no more than 20% of the country's population as a whole. A large number of those who took part (among them a significant number of young people) were unable to answer this question and had no idea of the population ratio of the ethnic majority compared to that of the ethnic minorities. The survey also found that a small number of those questioned (8%) were of the opinion that Georgia's ethnic minorities should be assimilated. Another group of respondents (18%) maintained that ethnic minorities should leave Georgia and go back to the country of their historical origin. The majority of those questioned (70%) spoke out in favour of the peaceful coexistence of diverse cultures. The group of respondents opposed to the assimilation of ethnic minorities is likely to comprise both those who recognise the value of other cultures and those who are afraid of losing the 'Georgian genotype'.

Despite a recent decline in the population of Georgia, the proportion of ethnic Georgians in the total population has increased. However, the fear remains undiminished that national minorities, particularly those that are compactly settled, present a threat to Georgian society and independence. The reason behind this fear may be that certain territories have been

*de facto* lost to Georgia and the prospects for their future return are unclear (Nodia, 2003). The Georgian majority fears that the close communities of Armenians and Azerbaijanis will, first of all, demand autonomy and then reunification with their historical homeland. Similar fears are expressed regarding the repatriation of the Meskhetian Turks; it is thought that if they return to Georgia they will settle together in a close-knit community in Dshavakheti on the Georgian-Turkish border, demand autonomy and then unite with Turkey. Thus while the Georgian majority fears the separatist tendencies of ethnic minorities will lead to the collapse of the state, ethnic minorities fear that the majority will either assimilate them or reduce them to minority groups with low social status whilst gradually curtailing their rights and repressing their cultures.

#### **The Attitude of Georgian Youth towards other Ethnic groups**

With this broader context in mind, the question of attitudes toward ethnic minorities among young people in Georgia is now addressed drawing on evidence from existing academic studies of what informs young peoples' concepts of their 'own' and 'other', of 'us' and 'them'. How exactly do young people define the boundaries between 'their own' and the 'other'? And of the various 'others', which are considered more acceptable or neutral and which pose a threat? How far have the stereotypes held by young people moved away from those held by their parents' generation?

According to the findings of a study by Nata Gabinashvili (2005) Georgian students, when characterising members of their own ethnic group, experience significant 'intra-group favouritism'. They envisage a minimal social distance between themselves and other Georgians and attribute features, which they regard as positive to 'their own' people.<sup>iii</sup> Thus, the statistically average young Georgian believes that Georgians are pleasant company, make the best marriage partners, are patriotic, strive to be first, value freedom and independence above all, place friendships above business relations, and are well disposed towards other nationalities. Participants in Gabinashvili's survey emphasised the patriotic and traditional character of the Georgian people, qualities that are generally associated with the older generation. At the same time, they did not regard Georgians as characteristically law-abiding citizens, believing

that they assigned greater significance to personal relationships and the need to uphold tradition. Of course, there were some negative judgments of Georgians by some participants in the study, but there were far fewer of these than there were positive comments.

Asked to characterise the representatives of various other nationalities (Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Abkhazians, Ossetians, Russians), Georgian students painted a less appealing and sometimes negative picture. The social distance felt in relation to these groups clearly has increased. This is a consequence of the fact that young people's knowledge of certain ethnic groups (such as the Abkhazians, the Ossetians and even the Russians) has become poorer because there is so little contact with them. This suggests that young Georgians tend to resort to stereotypes in evaluating other cultures and take as their starting point the domestic and global political situation, which they also generally perceive through prevalent stereotypes.

One example of how the political situation can inform stereotypes can be found in the attitude of Georgian young people to Russia and Ukraine. A significant proportion of Georgian society regards the policies pursued by Russia today as a continuation of the imperial traditions of pre-revolutionary Russia. Russia, they argue, does not want to let go of Georgia, but it wants a Georgia without Georgians. Nevertheless, Georgian citizens are far from unanimous in their views on Georgian-Russian relations. A large proportion of the population in Georgia views Russia as the instigator of the wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and therefore responsible for the country's territorial losses. However, the socially disadvantaged section of the population in Georgia, which includes many representatives of ethnic minorities, looks to Russia to resolve the social problems that have accumulated over the last few years (this section of society is nostalgic for the 'good old days' of the Soviet era). Many Georgians fall back on a compromise; Georgia, they argue, should remain independent but retain strong links with Russia. In parts of Georgian society the past perception prevails of two Russias: the Russia of politics, which is perceived negatively; and the Russia of culture, which is seen in a positive light.

It is interesting to note the attitude of young people toward the question of equal status for different ethnic groups. According to

Gabinashvili's research, when asked whether the rights of citizens in Georgia were affected by their ethnic origin, the overwhelming majority of respondents (83%) answered that this was sometimes the case. In response to the question of whether Georgians should enjoy greater privileges than other ethnic groups, 48% gave a positive answer, 27% gave a negative answer and the rest were undecided. As these figures show, the majority of respondents acknowledged the fact that the civil rights of 'others' in Georgia are sometimes violated because of their ethnic origin, but most importantly, half of the respondents stated unequivocally that ethnic Georgians should enjoy greater privileges. The majority (71%) believed that representatives of other nationalities should not be appointed to positions of power (such as ministerial posts, heads of departments, judges, senior military personnel, management of large companies, etc.) (Gabinashvili 2005: 81-3). This attitude was in evidence at the time of the election campaigns when one of main methods used to discredit political candidates was to indicate their non-Georgian roots.

In contrast to the discourse of 'ethnicity and citizenship', Georgian students were more liberal with regard to friendship and personal relationships. Georgians claimed they felt no greater social distance from friends and neighbours of other ethnic groups than from Georgian friends, and 54% stated that ethnic origin would be of no importance to them in choosing a future marriage partner. Nevertheless, about a third of all respondents claimed not to support mixed marriages on the grounds that 'The Georgian race is a small one and no good will come of mixing with 'foreigners' (Gabinashvili 2005: 83-4).

The majority of the respondents (75%) thought that both Georgians and non-Georgians had an equal chance of getting a good education in Georgia despite the fact that the reform of education begun in 2005 has put higher education beyond the reach of most ethnic minorities. This is because many of them have no knowledge of the new official state language, Georgian, and are thus unable to take the examination in Georgian language, a requirement introduced by the reform as part of common entrance exams. According to data from the Ministry of Education and Science, only a small number of ethnic minority students entered Georgian institutes of higher education in 2005, <sup>iv</sup> while, before the reform, the

existence of a large number of fee-paying universities afforded anyone with sufficient financial means a chance of gaining a degree.

Gabinashvili's research shows that, in identifying what is 'foreign' or 'other', young people in Georgia draw on traditional patterns of perception as well as the wider political situation and state policies on ethnic minorities. The participants in the study had little experience of contact even with those ethnic groups that live in concentrated communities on the territory of Georgia (such as the Azerbaijanis and Armenians), not to mention those residing in conflict-ridden regions (such as the Abkhazians) or in other countries (such as Chechens and Iranians).

The findings of Gabinashvili's study are valuable in demonstrating general trends in the attitudes of Georgian youth towards ethnic minorities. However, the geography of the sample (three towns in Georgia) and the narrow social segment (students) mean that the sample is not sufficiently representative to enable us to draw general conclusions with regard to Georgian youth as a whole. It is also difficult to estimate (or predict) what likelihood there is of the attitudes uncovered in the study manifesting themselves in actual behaviour, while the use of closed questions to understand complex and often contradictory views on such sensitive issues has inherent limitations.

### **Social Institutions and Ethnic Stereotypes: Church and School**

In order to understand how ethnic attitudes among young people are formed it is essential to study not only the general socio-political situation but also how social institutions help forge and consolidate stereotypes about 'other' ethnic and religious groups. The division of society into 'us' and 'them' in Georgia today has both ethnic and religious dimensions and it is thus important to examine the role of the church in setting the tone for the expression of xenophobic attitudes among young people.

The growth in the number of believers and active churches in Georgia in recent years has led to the deterioration in relations between different religious groups<sup>v</sup>. Statistical data indicate that, while the majority of Georgians consider themselves Orthodox Christians, there are also a significant number of Muslims and followers of the Gregorian church in the country. According to the findings of a study by a group

of Georgian sociologists (Nizharadze et al 2004), 79.4% of Georgian respondents hold the view that the social and national situation would improve if all Georgians were Orthodox Christians. 50.3% believe that only the history of the Orthodox Church should be taught in religious history classes in schools. These findings reflect a tendency, which has become increasingly apparent in recent years, to identify Georgian nationality with Orthodox Christianity. The same survey found that of all the country's institutions (the government, the law-courts, parliament, police, the media), it is the church that is seen to be the most trustworthy (Nizharadze et al 2004: 107-110)<sup>vi</sup>.

Given that Georgian youth have, along with the population of Georgia as a whole, become more religious (or church-going) it is essential to consider the role of the Georgian Orthodox church in shaping the attitudes of Georgian youth to other ethnic groups. The results of a study by Anna Chelidze (2006) are of interest here, as they demonstrate that certain aspects of ethnic nationalism in Georgia today are both made manifest in, and actively encouraged by, religion.

Chelidze's research is based on expert interviews with members of the Georgian intelligentsia and scientific circles together with an analysis of the texts of sermons and publications in the church press. The majority of experts questioned by Chelidze expressed a highly negative view of the Georgian Orthodox church as one of the country's least liberal institutions, encouraging the spread of extreme nationalism in Georgian society. Orthodox nationalism is apparent in the emphasis placed by the church on the unique character of the Georgian language and people, who are regarded as God's chosen people. Faith is thus understood in a primordial manner, not as the free choice of the individual, but as a cultural legacy inherited genetically, passed on 'in the blood' of one's ancestors. Religious nationalism is also apparent in the opinion, widespread among church representatives, that religious minorities pose a serious problem for the Georgian people and for the Georgian Orthodox Church (Chelidze 2006: 133-36).

A study of sermons and church literature bears out the opinions of the experts. In the Georgian church press and in the sermons of Orthodox priests it is continually stressed that no country has had as many martyrs, as many worthy holy fathers or as many saints as Georgia

(143-44). The main enemy, according to the Orthodox Church, is liberalism. The Bishop Stefan, assures his readers, in one publication, that, 'Georgia is facing a great threat. The true faith of the Georgian people is being taken away from beneath our very noses. Unannounced, liberalism is starting to take root in Georgia as the state religion'. The Bishop was disagreeing with the fact that, according to the Georgian constitution, the state has a duty to protect the interests of the followers of any religious faith and must not give priority to any one faith in the educational process (146-47).

A study by Irina Sulkhanišvili (2005) looks at the relationship between the church and the school system, focussing on teachers and older school students. Sulkhanišvili concludes that religiosity (or church-going) has become common among adolescents today and that they show low levels of religious tolerance and view those of other denominations or religions negatively. This, she suggests, is largely due to the positive attitude displayed by their teachers towards the church alongside the encouragement, by teachers as well as priests and other ecclesiastics, of negative attitudes and stereotypes towards those of other religions. Teachers of history and Georgian literature are particularly 'effective' at this, as 'literature is taught as a guide to loving one's Motherland' (Sulkhanišvili 2005: 234). In almost every school there is now a chapel or meeting house, just as there was an obligatory 'red corner' set aside for Communist study and activity during the Soviet era. It has also become established practice to invite church figures to consecrate schools (Mindashvili 2005).

Sulkhanišvili's study includes extracts from interviews with teachers that show that the opinions held by the majority of Orthodox teachers regarding the situation in Georgia are formed exclusively under the influence of their spiritual mentors. To all intents and purposes, these teachers become mouthpieces for these spiritual mentors within the school and pupils often openly and aggressively condemn representatives of other religious denominations or non church-going Orthodox Christians. Sulkhanišvili believes that this type of 'collaboration' between church and school encourages stereotypical thinking and conformism among school students. When they are under the influence of the church, religious youngsters learn to accept ready-made judgments and attitudes without making any attempt to

work things out for themselves (Sulkhanishvili 2005: 233-44).

The studies carried out by Chelidze and Sulkhanishvili also present the more liberal opinions held by some ecclesiastics who wish to encourage tolerant attitudes in society. However, it is difficult to judge from the data presented in the studies the relative weighting of these contrasting tendencies - liberalist and fundamentalist - within the church itself. Do the views described above have a real impact on young people or are they simply rhetorical statements, confined within church walls? The role of religion and the school in the formation of ethnic stereotypes is a subject that demands further study.

### **Studying Ethnic Relations: The Focus-group Method**

The studies of ethnic relations discussed above provide valuable, but nevertheless highly fragmentary, information. In order to refine and 'test' certain trends evident in the research already discussed, further qualitative sociological research using the focus-group method was conducted. Work was carried out with three focus groups, in which students from Tbilisi State University (TSU) and Tbilisi Pedagogical University (TPU) took part (twenty-seven respondents in total). The members of one of the focus groups were humanities students, training to be teachers, at the Pedagogical University. The second focus group was made up of those studying psychology and journalism and the third comprised students of political science. Anybody interested was invited to take part in the focus groups, but in selecting participants, the researchers took into account both age (all participants were between 18 and 22 years old) and gender balance. The groups were made up of students from various years that had previously had little contact with one another. The focus-group sessions were held at the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development. Given that the focus groups discussed questions of relations between religious groups, it should be noted that the majority of participants described themselves as Orthodox, although only a few of them actively engaged in religious rituals (regular church-going, fasting, etc.). Thus the religion of the respondents in this case cannot be taken as a variable for analysis. All the participants of the focus groups referred to themselves as ethnic Georgians.

The main subjects under discussion were: the relationship between different ethnic and religious groups; the relationship between the ethnic majority and different ethnic minorities; the level (or absence) of xenophobia in Georgian society; and existing and potential ethno-political conflicts in Georgia and their causes.

Due to the small number of participants in the focus groups this study does not allow us to draw wide-ranging conclusions. It does, nevertheless, offer the opportunity to discern a number of basic trends, which correspond to some extent with the arguments presented above. It should be noted that each of the participants engaged actively in the discussion of all the questions and that each focus group lasted for more than two hours; evidence of the participants' interest in the subject in question. At the beginning of each focus-group session, after introducing the main subject of research, attention was paid to clarifying how respondents understood key terms used to describe relations between different social, ethnic and religious groups such as 'xenophobia', 'chauvinism', 'discrimination', 'racism', etc. In the course of discussion the concepts of equal rights, sovereignty of the law, human rights, etc. were also touched upon. The students were, for the most part, familiar with these terms although not always able to give strictly rigorous definitions of them. However, although active in their groups, students proved to be not particularly well informed about the issues under discussion and there was a tendency, albeit not quite as pronounced as in the nationwide survey noted above, to overestimate the proportion of ethnic minorities in the country.

At the beginning of the focus-group sessions, speaking on the subjects of racism, xenophobia, chauvinism and discrimination in Georgian society, students reiterated the celebrated assumption that the Georgians are, by tradition, tolerant towards other nations. They claimed that Georgians do not and never have oppressed members of ethnic minorities. The focus-group participants gave a positive assessment of the relations between ethnic groups in Georgia, although during the course of discussion, they, as it were, 'discovered' problems in this area. To a certain extent the students were alarmed by the word 'racism'. This is the comment of one student:

We're not racist. We've never oppressed others or made them into slaves. How could we be racist? We don't have any blacks in our country. (male student, 19, journalism faculty, TSU) <sup>vii</sup>

The students found it difficult to admit that such a negative quality could be ascribed to Georgians. Nevertheless, a small number of participants dissented from the majority view. In response to the comment that Georgians could not be racist as there were no 'blacks' in the country, for example, one participant remarked:

According to this logic – 'We're not racists because there are no blacks in our country', it follows that we will become racist as soon as blacks appear here. At the moment, black people visit Georgia in connection with work and we, the Georgians, are amicably disposed towards them. But what if they start to live in Tbilisi? Will that mean that we change for the worse and begin to treat them badly? (male student, 21, psychology faculty, TSU)

Most of the respondents declared that they would never treat anybody badly because of their ethnic origin and some noted that Georgians did not treat badly those who were well disposed towards them. A student from the pedagogical university claimed that:

Georgians have never started wars themselves. Historically, it has always been other countries that wanted to occupy Georgia. For centuries, Georgia has fought for independence and for the preservation of its culture and it has never attacked others. (female student, 18, TPU)

Some of the respondents pointed out that while Georgians might not treat a 'foreigner' or an 'outsider' badly, nevertheless a certain distance exists between the two. The students

attempted to classify 'others' or 'foreigners' on an ethnic basis. They observed that while the majority of young people in Georgia have little or no experience of personal contact with the representatives of other ethnic groups from other countries, there is a distinct hierarchy of preference. Foreigners from Europe (Italians, Germans, English, Spanish) are considered more acceptable and viewed in a more positive light than some other ethnic groups from the Caucasus and from outside Europe (the same tendency is noted in Gabanishvili's study of 2005). At the same time, the respondents stressed that they personally had nothing against any particular ethnic group, as they do not harbour aggressive feelings towards other nationalities, but at the same time they prefer to keep them at a certain distance.

I don't feel aggressive towards people on the basis of their ethnic origin. I get angry with people if they hurt or deceive me, but Georgians might do that too. I'd like everybody to lead a normal life. No racial group should demean or humiliate any other. But I think we should preserve our national borders and that mainly Georgians should live in Georgia, so that our culture does not disappear. If non-Georgians were to be in the majority, our language would disappear. (female student, 21, TPU)

When asked if discrimination existed in Georgia, the immediate reaction of the students was 'No, there is no discrimination here'. In order to back up this argument they offered the following evidence:

In Georgia there are Russian, Armenian and Azerbaijani schools, and there is an Armenian theatre in Tbilisi. Nobody prevents them from speaking in their own native language. They live in the same way as everybody else in Georgia. Now there are many people who are badly-off in Georgia and most of them are Georgians. If Georgians were better off than everybody else you could talk

about discrimination. Ethnic minorities exaggerate their problems, they are more acutely aware of them. They think that people create problems for them on purpose, but that isn't the case. (male student, 20, TPU)

However, the students then gradually began to discuss various problems faced by minorities besides economic problems. It is true that they tended to attribute these problems to specific causes (such as ignorance of the Georgian language) rather than a deliberate desire on the part of Georgians to infringe the rights of other national groups.

During the course of discussion, the students fixed on two useful criteria by which to judge the level of discrimination against a particular social group: the first of these was social status; the second was the presence of ethnic minority representatives in senior positions, in authority or in parliament. While they were not aware of the exact numbers of people from ethnic minorities in Georgia, the participants decided nevertheless that there are only a minimal number of ethnic minority representatives in senior administrative posts in the country's capital and central region. However, they suggested that in areas where there are concentrated ethnic minority communities, members of these minorities did occupy the main administrative posts. Some participants sought to explain this lack of representation (or minimal representation) of ethnic minorities at senior level by the fact that minority members may not know the state language and the law now demands that all state employees have a knowledge of Georgian. A significant number of participants took the view that it was 'better and more reliable' for the most important decisions in the country to be made by Georgians and that therefore Georgians should occupy the most responsible positions. Those in favour of this took the view that representatives of other ethnic groups could never be such patriots as Georgians and only a very small number of participants reacted critically to this notion.

On the whole, we can conclude that the participants in the focus groups tended to express their views using the binary opposition 'us' and 'them' and showed a less trusting attitude towards minorities than towards members of their own ethnic group. When asked if this cautious attitude and mistrust of minorities was a manifestation of xenophobia, the majority disagreed, arguing that there were real reasons for this caution. The majority reiterated the statement that they had nothing against the minority nations living on the territory of Georgia, and that their members should have the same rights as all other Georgian citizens. However, they claimed that Georgians needed to guard against minorities being used by Russia to gain control of Georgia and the Caucasus. By way of example, the participants pointed to the conflicts in Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia, which had led to Georgia losing control of those territories.

Today, when the return of Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia to Georgia is a matter of dispute, we should be very careful that other forces don't use ethnic minorities against us. (female student, 20, TSU, faculty of journalism)

Another example of Russia's 'use' of minorities cited by the students was the situation in Dzhavakheti, where a concentrated population of Armenians makes up 95% of the region's population.

I've seen reports on television several times saying that the Armenians in Dzhavakheti are demanding autonomy. I don't know for sure, but some say that once they are granted autonomy they will demand independence, just as the Abkhazians and Ossetians did. And Russia will support them because Russia still has a military base in Dzhavakheti. (female student, 18, TPU)

The focus-group members also levelled some criticisms at Armenia, where allegedly 'a book has been published claiming that almost all the Georgian churches are actually Armenian' (male student, 22, TPU). Against this

background, several participants felt that Armenians living in Georgia were the country's least dependable citizens.

By contrast, far fewer of the participants reacted critically to statements of this nature, pointing out that the causes of both currently ongoing and potential conflicts had their roots not only in Russia's political activity in the region in question but in the tense relationship between Georgians and other ethnic minorities. They also remarked that certain mistakes had been made in the past in relation to the Ossetians and the Abkhazians which had led to armed conflict with those peoples, and that it was essential to take those mistakes into account in order to avoid similar problems and conflicts with other ethnic groups (Armenians and Azerbaijanis).

As far as religious groups were concerned, a large proportion of the focus-group members argued that the Orthodox Church should be allowed certain privileges 'as Georgia is an Orthodox country'. Participants also remarked that the growth of various religious sects and the appearance of new ones reflected campaigns pursued by certain powers opposed to Georgian independence who 'want to control Georgia through sectarians, whom they can buy off. After all, they are not true believers' (female student, 22, TPU).

With the exception of a small number of more critically inclined individuals, focus-group members did not consider Georgians intolerant towards ethnic minorities. This fact in itself (that they wish to seem positively disposed) shows potential for the development of good relations between ethnic groups. At the same time, the perception Georgians have of themselves as tolerant may remain little more than rhetoric that is easily combined with the unrecognised justification of discrimination. An example of this is the 'explanation' given by one focus-group member cited above for the lack of ethnic minority representatives in top positions, 'Ethnic minorities do not occupy senior administrative posts because they are not proficient in the official state language' (male student, 20, TPU).

### **Ethnic Relations in Georgia: The Perspective of Ethnic Minority Youth**

A number of informal discussions were conducted with young Armenians from the region of Samtskhe Dzhavakheti, where the Armenian population of Georgia is concentrated.

The meetings took place in the towns of Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki during a series of seminars carried out throughout 2005. Those taking part in the discussions were, for the most part, students from the universities of Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki (about twenty people). Also taking part were young people who had just graduated from higher education institutions who were still unemployed at the time of the discussion (about ten people). The young people who took part in the study were aged between 19 and 30 and there was approximately the same number of men and women in the groups.

These young Armenians made statements about Georgia and the Georgians that were critical but not offensive. Participants said they maintained a friendly relationship with many of their Georgian contemporaries but, on the whole, they had an ambivalent attitude towards Georgians. In general, they expressed a greater degree of alienation from Georgians in the capital and other regions of the country than from those who lived in their area, although one group of participants (students at the local university in Akhaltsikhe where Armenians and Georgians study together) even felt alienated from those Georgians who lived locally. On an everyday level this distance was apparent in the fact that young people tended to separate into groups according to their ethnic origin, although they claimed that this was not a conscious process. Social events would be organised for members of both ethnic groups together, but more frequently they would meet separately in groups made up of members of their own nationality. All those involved in the discussions commented that they had little contact with Georgians from other regions of Georgia<sup>viii</sup>.

The attitude of the Armenian students to their citizenship was also ambivalent. They claimed that Georgians accused them (the Armenians) of a lack of patriotism in relation to Georgia, but they argued that Georgians themselves tended to distance themselves from Armenians.

Most of the young people, adolescents and children from Dzhavakheti have never been to Tbilisi, but they have almost all been on trips to Yerevan or gone to visit relatives there. Most Armenians go to college or university in Armenia and Russia.

If anyone becomes seriously ill, they go to Armenia to be treated. How can Armenians feel as if they are Georgian citizens? (female student, 20, Akhalkalaki)<sup>ix</sup>

When asked why Armenians preferred to study in Armenia or Russia rather than Georgia, respondents replied that as they did not have a good knowledge of Georgian, they felt more comfortable in an environment where the main language was Armenian or Russian. Even so, a number of the respondents who had a good knowledge of Georgian still preferred to study outside Georgia as they were hoping to find work in either Armenia or Russia after they graduated, rather than in Georgia. While they were aware that the law on civil service now demands that all civil service employees are proficient in the state language, they argued that this was simply used as a pretext by the Georgian government and Georgians to refuse to employ Armenians:

Who is going to give an Armenian a good job with such levels of unemployment in the country? It's hard even for a labourer to find a job. They always hire 'their own people' - Georgians. There are people with a good education and a fluent knowledge of Georgian sitting about unemployed. They've got diplomas, and now they're sitting about with nothing to do. The government concocted this law-forbidding people who don't know Georgian from working in state institutions just so they could employ their own people. (male graduate, 27, unemployed, Akhalkalaki)

Many believe that the distance between youth of different nationalities has increased over the last few years as a result of recent reforms to the education system that have made it almost impossible for minorities to receive higher education in Georgia. Seeing no prospects for themselves in Georgia, many Armenian students prefer to go to college in Armenia, or, if they can afford it, in Russia. Many respondents maintained that representatives of ethnic minorities would always have less chance of

finding employment than Georgians, even if they were graduates and were fluent in Georgian. Some believed that the claims of equal rights for all citizens in Georgia amounted to nothing more than words and that, in actual fact, nothing was being done to improve the lives of ethnic minorities.

The Armenian students were better informed than their Georgian counterparts about the number of Armenians occupying prominent positions in government and parliament, and showed greater interest in the issue. Moreover, they were highly critical of the situation, arguing that the number of Armenians in responsible posts 'could be counted on the fingers of one hand'. They were of the opinion that many of these Armenians were not 'genuine' Armenians: they had become like Georgians and were simply 'working for the Georgians'. If this were not the case, it was argued, they would not have been able to make such headway in their careers.

The students involved in the discussions were highly sensitive to everything that was said on the subject of Armenians in the media. For instance, they said they were irritated when, occasionally, Georgian politicians or public figures would, while speaking publicly, refer to Georgians as the 'titular nation' and consign ethnic minorities to the role of 'guests'. They were very sensitive also to jokes told about them by Georgian fellow-students. For instance, one female student remarked:

When people tell jokes about Armenians or laugh about them I feel uncomfortable. They tell me I can tell jokes about Georgians, too, but I think that that would not offend them in the same way, probably because they are Georgians and they are living in Georgia, while I am an Armenian. You have to be Armenian to understand what I mean. (female student, 20, Akhaltsikhe)

While young Georgians show a 'suspicious' attitude towards ethnic minorities, considering them insufficiently patriotic citizens, ethnic minority members themselves (in this case, Armenians) are worried that the Georgian authorities intend to oppress them to the extent that they are 'driven out' of Georgia. At the same time, the Armenian students who took part in the

discussions also offered more positive judgements of Georgians. This perhaps indicates that deteriorating relations between ethnic groups are the result of a complex political and economic context in the country and that, if solutions are found to the country's other problems, ethnic friction will recede.

### **Conclusion**

The study of ethnic (in)tolerance in contemporary Georgian society in general and among young people in particular is extremely limited and what little research there is has been published only in Georgian and/or Russian. This article has thus sought to achieve three main objectives. Firstly, it has provided a brief summary of the existing scholarship in the field. Secondly, it has signaled the importance of addressing the issue of ethnic (in)tolerance in the context of the historical, political, cultural and socio-cultural transformations that have taken place in Georgian society over the last two decades. Thirdly, it has outlined the findings of two original research projects conducted among young representatives of both the ethnic majority and a minority (Armenian) group in Georgia.

The original research drawn on in this article suggests a number of significant conclusions. The mistrust and suspicion felt towards one another by the Georgian majority and by ethnic minorities, while it does not go as far as pronounced xenophobia, is a barrier to social integration. A significant number of the young Georgians who took part in the research outlined here displayed stereotyped, conformist modes of thinking, influenced by the social and political environment. The same could also be said of the attitudes of Armenian youth. However, the limited number of both Georgian participants in focus groups and Armenians taking part in (informal) discussions with researchers means that it would be unwise to generalise these conclusions in relation to the whole of Georgian or Armenian youth.

Despite declaring that Georgians are tolerant, Georgian young people (or at least, a significant number of them) have a tendency to construct relations with other ethnic groups according to an ethnic 'hierarchy' which permits and implies a positive attitude to other ethnic groups as long as they remain within a prescribed social role and space. The majority of young people formally acknowledges equal rights for all ethnic groups in Georgian society on the level of legislation, but in actual social

and political life, refuses to accord people of ethnic minorities a higher social status. For example, most Georgians cannot accept that representatives of ethnic minorities should be allowed to take part in the governance of the country or take important national decisions. The established roles of 'hosts' and 'guests' are clearly uppermost in the minds of Georgian youth. A similar hierarchical attitude is apparent in relation to other religious groups. A significant number of those who participated in the research believed that the Orthodox religion should have a higher status than other religious faiths and denominations in the country, although among Georgians themselves there are a number of Catholics and Muslims.

However, the data presented here do not lend themselves to the conclusion that there is any pronounced xenophobia among young Georgians. During the research, a significant number of participants spoke out in favour of equal rights for different ethnic groups. Moreover, it could be argued that present day Georgian society holds the potential for developing a truly ethnically tolerant society; the ethnic minority respondents in the research, for example, believed the current deterioration in relations between ethnic groups to be a temporary phenomenon that would improve once certain social and political problems in the country were resolved. The fact that Georgians openly profess themselves to be tolerant and the fact that some members of society (albeit only a few) declare it essential to accord equal rights to all the country's citizens of Georgia could serve as the starting point for change as regards the widespread intolerant attitudes in Georgian society.

It is important to emphasise that the approach employed in the research presented in this paper differs significantly from existing studies in a number of respects. Firstly, the research attempted to understand ethnic tolerance and xenophobia as they are produced and reproduced through young people's narratives at the grassroots level rather than at the official level of state policy or through critical interventions by experts (NGOs, academics, lawyers, journalists, etc.). This focus led to the employment of qualitative sociological research such as focus-group discussions and unstructured interviews. Thus, while on one level the findings generated from the use of 'soft methodology' simply confirm more general trends discernible from survey-based research (see Gabinashvili

2005), the article offers additional insights that illuminate the complexity and ambiguity of young people's understandings of such concepts as tolerance, race and citizenship. Finally, the careful attention to narratives of interviewees and focus-group participants may be seen to have an empowering effect since the subjects of this research - young people and ethnic minorities - rarely have the opportunity to voice their opinions and have those views represented in mainstream discourse.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The question of the repatriation of Meskhetian Turks is the subject of political debate and profiteering. Following the admission of Georgia into the Council of Europe in 1999, the government committed itself to the repatriation of the Muslim Meskhetian Turks over a period of 12 years. Those opposed to the repatriation, however, claimed that the introduction of a new ('other', 'foreign') cultural constituency, with a different religion and an unclear ethnic identity, would lead to fresh conflicts (Zaselenie 'turkov-meskhetintsev' est' smert' dlia Gruzii 2006; Arabidze 2006; Nado otsenit' meskhetinskuiu etnochistku 1918-1919? 2006; Vozvrashchenie turkov-meskhetintsev vyzovet krovoprolitie 2006).

<sup>2</sup> The findings of this survey are available via the Ministry of Education and Science website at [www.mes.gov.ge](http://www.mes.gov.ge).

<sup>3</sup> 300 students from higher education institutes in Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Telavi took part in the research. Gabinashvili examines ethnic stereotypes and the criteria on which they are based with the help of the psycho-semantic method of 'plural identification' using a specially designed questionnaire. The respondents evaluated their relations to the following ethnic groups: Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Abkhazians, Ossetians, Chechens, Russians, Ukrainians, Jews, Armenians, Italians, Germans, Turks, Iranians and Japanese.

<sup>4</sup> Data on the results of the common entrance exam of 2005 have been published by the National Centre for Examinations and Grades of the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia; see [www.naec.ge](http://www.naec.ge).

<sup>5</sup> For instance, in recent years a polemic has developed between the Georgian and Armenian religious communities regarding the historical origin and rights to ownership of a number of churches. The discussion assumed the character

of an ethnic standoff, which erupted in clashes between Armenian and Georgian youth in one region of Georgia (the Akhalkalaki region, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> The survey was based on a sample of 1,000 people and was conducted in 2003 in Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Gori.

<sup>7</sup> Quotations from focus groups are followed by details of the speaker's sex and age and, sometimes, place of study.

<sup>8</sup> Despite the assertions of respondents it should be noted that in recent years (following the Rose Revolution of 2003) there have been several programmes organised by the state and by local and international NGOs, designed to encourage the integration of ethnic minorities. Summer camps have been organised for young people and adolescents both in the capital and in other areas of Georgia.

<sup>9</sup> Quotations from informal discussions with young Armenians are followed by details of the speaker's age, sex, occupation and the location at which the discussion took place.

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