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Addressing the Isolation of Minorities in Georgia: Project Engagement as a Key Instrument of the HCNM

Background to the Work of the HCNM in Georgia

The Tools of the HCNM

This article seeks to illustrate the significant contribution that projects can make to the HCNM's work in promoting the integration and full participation of minorities in society, using Georgia as an example. The projects are not well documented, but, as I will try to show, they are a powerful instrument in the HCNM's engagement in conflict prevention.

Georgia constitutes an interesting case study in three respects. First, Georgia is the OSCE participating State to which the HCNM has provided by far his most comprehensive project assistance. Second, most of these projects have been supporting the Georgian government in areas where it has actively engaged in reform. The Georgian experience illustrates the significance of co-operation with government to achieve long-term objectives. Third, as ten years have passed since the first project was initiated in Georgia, it is now time to reflect on the manifold functions that projects have fulfilled in the HCNM's support for Georgia and to use it as an illustration of the role projects play in conflict prevention in general.

The HCNM's mandate is to prevent conflicts involving national minorities. The successive High Commissioners have sought to reduce tensions in multiethnic societies by promoting the participation of both majorities and minorities in the social, economic, cultural, and political life of the country. Efforts to accommodate minority culture exclusively are indeed insufficient to enhance stability at both the national and regional levels, as they could lead to further separation and isolation of minorities from the rest of society. Therefore a key priority of the HCNM is to promote policies of integration in multiethnic societies; that is, for both majorities and minorities.¹

The HCNM fulfils his mandate on conflict prevention mainly by offering policy advice to governments and by engaging with all stakeholders, including organizations representing national minorities. Seeking to strike a balance between divergent interests, the High Commissioner mediates between all the relevant parties in order to reach constructive agreements on

Note: I would like to warmly thank my colleagues Natalie Sabanadze, Kaupo Kand, and Nino Gogoladze for their sound suggestions and input, as well as Ika Eegdeman for her patient help with documentation.

1 See the latest HCNM *Ljubljana Guidelines on Integration of Diverse Societies*, November 2012.

minority-related issues. To ensure that such agreements are translated into sustainable policies, the HCNM provides legal advice, for example, on laws pertaining to national minorities, language, or formerly deported peoples (FDPs) which can have direct or indirect implications for the lives of minorities. The HCNM's experience has been bundled into thematic "Recommendations" and "Guidelines" on the following key areas: education rights, linguistic rights, participation, minority languages in the broadcast media, policing, inter-state relations and, most recently, integration.²

Projects constitute the "third instrument" in the HCNM's toolbox by reinforcing and illustrating the policy advice and the recommendations.³ Projects are implemented through the OSCE's unified budget and the extra-budgetary contributions of OSCE participating States. Project activities may vary from one-off events, such as round tables and conferences, to long-term capacity building. Just like political and legal advice, those projects are designed and implemented with the long-term aim of encouraging structural changes in the social, economic, and political position of minorities. Like policy advice, projects involve co-operation with external individuals and organizations, be they experts assisting governments in policy reform or local implementing partners.

Beyond purely technical assistance, projects fulfil an essential role because they strengthen the outreach of the HCNM to the regions where minorities live. The HCNM uses this outreach for the purpose of monitoring and, importantly, to create a context of co-operation with governments and civil society.⁴ During his field visits, the HCNM talks to local stakeholders about how they perceive reforms, how these affect their lives, what progress a particular reform has facilitated, and what obstacles they face when implementing reforms. In his communications with central authorities, the HCNM will raise issues of reform implementation – insofar as these are relevant – and convey the communities' concerns. In this sense, projects enable the HCNM to communicate with governments and civil society and act whenever necessary as a mediator between parties.

Minority Issues in Georgia and the HCNM

The HCNM has assisted Georgia over the years, mainly but not exclusively in increasing the participation of its two largest minorities, the Armenians

2 The Recommendations and Guidelines can be found on the HCNM website, at: <http://www.osce.org/hcnm/66209>.

3 The identification of projects as a "third instrument" has been made by Wolfgang Zellner. Cf. Wolfgang Zellner, The OSCE's High Commissioner on National Minorities – His Work, Effectiveness, and Recommendations to Strengthen the HCNM as an Institution, in: Heinz Gärtner/Adrian Hyde-Price/Erich Reiter (eds.), *Europe's New Security Challenges*, Boulder 2001, pp. 273-274.

4 Cf. Charlotte Altenhöner/Francesco Palermo, Civil Society Contributions to the Work of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, in: *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 2/2011, pp. 201-218, here: p. 212.

and the Azeri, in public life in the country. According to the 2002 census, these minorities represented just 5.7 per cent and 6.5 per cent of the total population of Georgia, respectively.⁵ However, they are settled compactly in regions where they constitute up to 90 per cent of the local population.

In particular, Samtskhe-Javakheti, a mountainous area inhabited by a sizeable Armenian minority and economically the poorest region in Georgia, holds a strategic position because of its borders with Armenia and Turkey. Until recently, the region was completely isolated from the rest of the country due to several factors. Economic hardship and other problems, including ruined infrastructure, characterized people's daily lives. Importantly, Samtskhe-Javakheti was a restricted area due to the presence of a Russian military base that was not dismantled until 2007. The Russian base played a key economic role in the region, with the rouble as the main currency. The local inhabitants are also isolated linguistically, as they predominately speak Armenian rather than Georgian. As a result, people maintained closer economic and social ties with Armenia and the Armenian diaspora in Russia and other countries than they did with Georgia. In particular, militants in the Armenian community in Samtskhe-Javakheti have in the past been involved in militant activities against the government, laying claim to an autonomous status within Georgia or even unification with Armenia, which a decade ago led the media to label the region a potential "second Nagorno-Karabakh".⁶

By way of contrast, the Azeris have, on the whole, maintained a less confrontational stance towards the government. Azeris are settled compactly in the region of Kvemo-Kartli, which borders Armenia and Azerbaijan. Despite being located less than 50 km from the capital, Kvemo-Kartli is no less isolated from the centre in economic, social, cultural, and political terms than Samtskhe-Javakheti. The Azeris' perception is that powerful and decision-making positions are occupied by Georgians. They believe that this also affects the distribution and management of the main source of income: agricultural resources. Meanwhile, ethnic Georgian communities in this region feel that the government supports minorities more than ethnic Georgians. These different perceptions have created a tense situation.

In addition to internal destabilizing factors, the conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the involvement of the Russian Federation as a major regional power in South Caucasus have helped bring about a perception that the tensions and inter-ethnic incidents which regularly occur in both Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo-Kartli are threats to the stability of the country.⁷

5 Cf. *Assessment of Civic Integration of National Minorities*, Tbilisi 2010, UN Association of Georgia, p. 11.

6 Svante E. Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A study of ethnopolitical conflict in the Caucasus*, London 2001, p. 181.

7 For an interesting analysis of threat perceptions among Georgian government officials and representatives of the Armenian minority, see Niklas Nilsson, *Obstacles to Building a Civic Nation: Georgia's Armenian Minority and Conflicting Threat Perceptions*, in: *Ethnopolitics* 2/2009, pp. 135-152.

One factor aggravating inter-ethnic tensions in Samtskhe-Javakheti is the history of deportation and the current process to repatriate its Meskhetian population. The High Commissioner first touched upon this issue, which would be an area of concern for years to come, in his discussions with the Georgian government during his second visit to Georgia in 1998. Among the approximately 100,000 people deported by Stalin from the Caucasus in the 1940s, the Meskhetians, a Turkic-speaking, indigenous Muslim group from the Samtskhe-Javakheti region of Georgia, are the last of the eight deported peoples of the former Soviet Union whose rehabilitation and repatriation remains unresolved.

The repatriation of the Meskhetians provides a good example of the HCNM's tireless efforts to draw the government's attention to this burning issue, notably through "silent diplomacy". The HCNM offered legal advice on the draft law on repatriation of FDPs, although this had only a limited effect on the outcome. When the commitment of the Georgian government to repatriation was secured, which did not happen until 2007, the HCNM provided expert assistance to the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation (MRA) and, more recently, broader assistance to the repatriation process in co-operation with the Caucasus branch of the European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI). He also facilitated dialogue between the Meskhetians abroad, as well as in Georgia, and the authorities. In 2012, the Georgian government commissioned a National Concept for Repatriation and Integration, which at the time of writing has still to be adopted. The effective resettlement of Meskhetians, especially in Samtskhe-Javakheti, the region from which they originate, will be monitored closely.

The assistance provided by the HCNM for Georgia's most sizeable minorities, the Armenians and Azeris, is probably his most significant contribution to the stability of the region. One of the major obstacles dividing the populations of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo-Kartli from the rest of Georgia and preventing their full participation in social, economic, and political affairs has been the language barrier. Throughout the Soviet period, schools in these regions functioned in many respects on the margins of the Georgian educational system. In fact, lessons in minority schools were given only in Russian, which functioned as a *lingua franca* across the whole Soviet Union, and in the minority language. In addition, minority teachers had a poor command, if any, of Georgian language. As a result, ethnic minorities settled compactly in Kvemo-Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti and did not receive adequate Georgian-language educational opportunities. When Georgia became independent in 1991, they were left without proper knowledge of the state language and without a language of communication with the rest of the country, as the Russian language gradually lost its importance as a means of communication between various linguistic groups. In the first decade following Georgia's independence, the government took limited steps to address

this issue, which obviously required long-term investment and comprehensive education reform.

The HCNM's continuous intervention during the past twelve years has sought to fill this large gap and to primarily – though not exclusively – offer opportunities for a broad range of minority representatives, from schoolchildren to professionals, to learn Georgian. The HCNM commenced his involvement in Samtskhe-Javakheti in 2000. Against the background of economic backwardness, isolation, and aspirations to irredentism referred to above, the major concern of the HCNM was that, following the other violent conflicts that have shaken the Caucasus since the preceding decade – in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and beyond the Georgian border in Chechnya in the north and Nagorno-Karabakh in the south – a conflict might erupt in this region too, possibly involving neighbouring countries or the “kin-states” of Armenia and Azerbaijan.⁸

In consideration of the very limited access to information on minorities and, except for small-scale projects, the minimal international presence in Samtskhe-Javakheti, the High Commissioner set up a monitoring network in 2000 that was implemented by the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD) and set out to guarantee first-hand, reliable, and timely information and analysis from this sensitive region. This tool has proven to be indispensable for fulfilling his early warning mandate in an area where, although no violence has erupted, tensions have regularly flared up. Subsequently, the HCNM commissioned needs assessments and organized information campaigns in Samtskhe-Javakheti in 2001 in order to identify relevant areas of support and available capacity on the ground for project implementation.

The HCNM forged plans to develop comprehensive support for Samtskhe-Javakheti in consultation with the UNDP. This led to two major programmes. One was set up and co-ordinated from Tbilisi by the UNDP (Integrated Development Programme, with other donors from 2002-2007). The other, run by the HCNM, started with a training course for civil servants and in 2003 evolved into the multi-year Conflict Prevention and Integration Programme in Samtskhe-Javakheti, which dealt with managing inter-ethnic relations, as well as media and legal aid. After proper needs assessment, the areas of assistance were replicated in Kvemo-Kartli from 2006 to 2011. The presence of the OSCE Mission to Georgia until 2009, and the HCNM antenna on the ground in the person of the National Programme Manager, have greatly facilitated the HCNM's engagement.

8 For a thought-provoking study on the impact of the relations between Georgia, Russia, and Armenia on these governments' attitudes to minorities in Georgia as a test case for the HCNM Bolzano/Bozen Recommendations on inter-state relations, see Natalie Sabanadze, *States, Minorities, and Regional Hegemony in the South Caucasus: Whose Responsibility to Protect?* In: Francesco Palermo/Natalie Sabanadze, *National Minorities in Inter-State Relations*, Leiden 2011 pp.167-183.

For its part, the Georgian government, after repeated encouragement by the HCNM and other international actors, implemented three decisive measures promoting the integration of minorities in 2005. The parliament ratified the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. To ensure its implementation, the government established the Civil Integration and Tolerance Council, which was to be responsible for the development of an overall integration policy called the National Concept and Action Plan for Tolerance and Civic Integration. This was adopted in 2009.⁹ Under the auspices of the Public Defender, the Council of National Minorities, an association of all the minorities in the country, facilitates dialogue between the state and minorities and is in charge of monitoring the implementation of the aforementioned Action Plan.

Within a relatively favourable context for policy reform, its projects have been aimed primarily at supporting the Georgian government in developing and implementing policies on minority integration and participation. As I will show below, the ten years of assistance for the Georgian government in the area of language education is the prime example of the HCNM's sustained support of policy development and subsequent implementation via local projects.

While putting the emphasis on language education by the state, the Conflict Prevention Programmes also engaged in school reform, training civil servants in the management of inter-ethnic relations, broadcast media, and legal aid. The HCNM subsequently targeted his assistance on education through the Georgia Education Programme (2011-2013). These comprehensive programmes, together with other, separate projects, make Georgia the beneficiary of his most comprehensive project assistance in the OSCE area.

In terms of the HCNM's engagement, Abkhazia occupies a peculiar position. The crisis that arose between the Georgian government and the breakaway region was the reason for the first visit to Georgia by High Commissioner Max van der Stoep, at the Georgian government's request, in 1997. Since then, minority rights and the respectful treatment of mainly, but not exclusively the Georgian minority in Abkhazia have remained high on the agenda of the High Commissioner, Max van der Stoep, and his successors Rolf Ekéus and Knut Vollebæk, as is shown by the regular visits and meetings with the parties concerned – whenever the political situation allowed – up until his latest visit in the summer of 2012. However, project involvement in Abkhazia has been extremely challenging, and therefore limited so far, due to the conflict in Abkhazia – especially since the recognition of Abkhazia's independence by Georgia's neighbour Russia in 2008.¹⁰

9 See Presidential Decree No. 639 “*On the Development of the national Concept and Action Plan for Tolerance and Civic Integration*” of 8 August 2005 and Decree No. 348, of the Prime Minister of Georgia, *National Concept for Tolerance and Civic Integration and Action Plan* of 8 May 2009, respectively.

10 Apart from consultations and seminars, project assistance consisted of small-scale support in 2004 and in the following years for local Georgian and Abkhaz language teachers in

Ten Years of Project Involvement

Language Education: The HCNM's Most Intensive Area of Assistance

Realizing that the linguistic isolation of minorities is an important obstacle to their social, economic, cultural, and political integration into Georgian society, the HCNM launched his programme of assistance focused on language education, which has remained a priority ever since. This assistance is the prime example of long-lasting support for and co-operation with the Georgian government. It began with a pilot scheme and policy development up until 2008, and has been followed by policy implementation since then. The process has proceeded at various speeds, featuring increasing collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Science but also periods of slowdown and even stagnation. The main fields covered are state-language education for adults (students entering university, civil servants, and teachers), multilingual education (MLE) at school level, and initiatives to promote minority languages. The latter have decreased over the years, for reasons that I will try to identify below.

In 2002, the HCNM launched his programme of assistance for the Armenian minority by means of a Georgian-language project for civil servants from minorities in support of the State Programme for Ensuring the Full Functioning of the State Language of Georgia. In doing so, he addressed the central issue for the Armenian civil servants, viz. to enhance their ability to work with administrative documents drafted in the state language. Correspondence between High Commissioner Rolf Ekéus and Nino Burjanadze, then chairperson of the Georgian parliament, reveals the High Commissioner's chief concern for the state language in Georgia. Stating that "in some regions of Georgia the shift in State language presents practical and political hurdles to social integration", the High Commissioner urged the government to "move immediately to elaborate a comprehensive programme to promote the knowledge and use of the State language throughout the country, including a programme of wide-spread language instruction in schools and the public service, especially at local level".¹¹ As mentioned above, it was only in 2009 that the long-awaited strategy was issued. In his discussions with high-ranking representatives of the government, the High Commissioner also strongly encouraged them to include state-language policy in a broader strategy of minority integration. In this regard he directly applied the *Lund Recommendations on the Effective Participation of National Minorities in Public*

Gali and two other districts that were most affected by the conflict. This is a good example of the constructive role a project can fulfil in a politically difficult context for building local capacity and maintaining dialogue with the authorities. Although the HCNM does not rule out project involvement in Abkhazia in the near future, this will remain challenging due to political and logistical restraints.

11 Address by Ambassador Rolf Ekéus to the OSCE HCNM-UNDP Conference "Promoting Integration and Development in the Samtskhe-Javakheti Region of Georgia", Tbilisi, 19 November 2002.

Life to the case of Georgia.¹² Thus the priorities of the HCNM's engagement were set and have been maintained since.

Referring to the limited use of Georgian among the minority population, the High Commissioner pointed to the need to adopt a law on the state language to encourage the broader usage of Georgian in daily life across the country. In that same year, the HCNM assisted the government with advice on the draft law, although this was never adopted.

Agreement on project involvement proved much easier to reach with the authorities than an agreement on the draft law. Given that public service constitutes an essential link between the central government and the minority regions, the HCNM decided to launch a project to train state employees from ethnic minority backgrounds in the state language, an undertaking which received the full support of the government. While state-language education had already proven to be a successful area of intervention in Macedonia and Moldova, this was the first time it was targeting state employees in general, ranging from professionals working in the local administration to teachers, hospital staff, and/or bank personnel. The project was implemented for some 700 civil servants between 2002 and 2007, with approximately 400 graduating.

Within the Conflict Prevention Programmes, language education gradually evolved into promotion of MLE reform. The HCNM considers bilingual education or – if several languages are involved – MLE to be by far the most effective strategy for addressing the linguistic diversity of society. Multilingual programmes aim to help pupils acquire literacy in several languages by developing their native language and full or partial competence in the official language. To attain this goal, pupils not only have language classes in the state language as well as their mother tongue, but also progressively learn maths, biology, and other subjects in the state language. The advantage of this educational model is that it strikes a balance between preserving minority identity and integrating into the society of the country where minorities are settled. Based on the positive experience previously gained, notably in the 1990s in the Baltic states, the HCNM has been successfully engaged for the past ten years in promoting MLE in Georgia at primary and secondary school levels. By embarking on this path, the HCNM effectively stimulated the Georgian government and minorities alike to, respectively, facilitate and attain multilingualism in conformity with *The Hague Recommendations Regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities* issued in 1996.¹³

12 Cf. Sally Holt, The Lund Recommendations in the Activities of the HCNM, in: *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 12/2005, pp. 169-188, here: p. 176.

13 Cf. the chapter "Minority education at primary and secondary levels", in: *The Hague Recommendations on the Education Rights of National Minorities & Explanatory Note*, October 1996, pp. 6-7. Although all major components of multilingual education are outlined, the concept of multilingual education is not used in the Recommendations. Only the term "multilingualism" can be found in the explanatory note, *ibid.*, p. 13.

The Conflict Prevention Programmes were followed by the Georgia Education Programme, which was launched in 2011 and will run until mid-2013. Focusing on the key area of language education, the programme continues down the main avenues of co-operation established in recent years while adding new initiatives such as an awareness-raising campaign among minority communities on the benefits of MLE pupils, and opportunities for adults to learn the state language. The programme also fosters communication between the local communities and the central authorities by informing the Ministry of Education and Science about the perceptions among Armenian and Azeri minority communities and teachers alike regarding MLE reform.

Over the years, the pace of HCNM assistance varied, depending mainly on the response of the government in implementing the language education reform. Of particular note are three main moments when the Georgian government took direct steps to enhance ownership of this reform. Firstly, the Language Houses, a local institution which was created by the HCNM in 2004 to provide Georgian language classes for adults in the minority regions, was taken over by the government in 2007 and then fell into decay. Fortunately, this initiative received a fresh boost in 2011 within the context of a wider government policy to promote the learning of the state language. The second, more comprehensive measure was implemented in 2008 when the government undertook policy reform in relation to MLE with the support of international experts seconded by the HCNM. As a result, the Ministry of Education and Science approved the “Multilingual Education Support Programme” in 2009 as part of a significant step towards an integration policy by the Georgian government, i.e. the National Concept for Tolerance and Civic Integration and the Action Plan.¹⁴ In designing the reform, the Ministry of Education and Science built on the positive MLE results and practices that were achieved with twelve pilot schools and implemented by the HCNM in co-operation with the Swiss NGO “Cimera” in 2006-2008. From 2009 onwards, the pilot scheme was extended to 40 minority schools. With the virtually simultaneous launch of the Georgia Education Programme and the president’s new initiative to support “Georgian Language for Future Success” in the spring of 2011, the implementation of reform received a further boost when recent graduates were sent to assist minority schools in Georgian language teaching.¹⁵ This measure, although not sustainable, had the advantage of bringing minority pupils and teachers into contact with Georgian native speakers and consequently enhancing their state-language skills.

14 Government of Georgia, *National Concept for Tolerance and Civic Integration*, 8 May 2009, at: <http://www.smr.gov.ge/docs/doc203.pdf>. On the multilingual education programme, see Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, Civil Integration Programs, at: <http://www.mes.gov.ge/content.php?id=547&lang=eng>.

15 Cf. *Georgian Language for Future Success*, at: http://www.tpdg.ge/index.php?action=page&p_id=257&lang=eng.

Significantly, the National Security Concept issued in 2005, was revised in 2011, mainly to take into account the new challenges that had arisen since the 2008 war with Russia. Interestingly, learning the Georgian language was also included as an important measure: “Civic integration requires the establishment of conditions in which all Georgian citizens of Georgia can learn the national language, thus facilitating their full participation in the nation’s political, economic, social, and cultural life.”¹⁶

Where do we stand now after ten years of endeavours in language education for the Armenian and Azeri minorities of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo-Kartli, respectively? First of all, the implementation of MLE policy is well underway thanks to targeted expert assistance, including regulations and strategy documents, and enhancement of the capacity of the ministry staff.¹⁷

Secondly, education officials, schoolteachers and, indirectly, schoolchildren have received support in MLE through training courses, textbooks, and other materials from experts supervised by NGOs, in particular from the Centre for Civil Integration and Inter-Ethnic Relations (CCIIR), with which the HCNM has successfully co-operated since 2002. As a leading expert noted in 2006 when the pilot was launched, “practically none of the class teachers had the appropriate level of second language proficiency necessary for teaching. Also, hardly any of the subject teachers in minority schools were capable of conducting his/her subject in a second language”.¹⁸ Teachers’ professional development still is a long process, which, if it wants to lead to enduring results and enhanced education in both the Georgian language and one minority language using modern methodologies, will require long-term and consistent investment from the government. The latter made this a priority, as is shown by the 2008 reforms, the subsequent decision to extend the pilot scheme to 40 schools, and the initiative launched in 2011 to support the state language, even though a long-term strategy has still to materialize. Teachers and staff from the pilot schools are now better informed and coached on how to offer MLE. When financial support from the government was delayed, there were cases where Armenian schools were even temporarily trying to carry on with their own funding. However, motivation cannot be maintained for long if it is not nourished with clarity regarding prospects of sustained financial, organizational, and methodological support. Under the last government it was repeatedly announced that the approximately 225 minority schools across the country should embark on MLE with ever-changing

16 *National Security Concept of Georgia*, p. 10, at: <http://nsc.gov.ge/files/files/National%20Security%20Concept.pdf>.

17 More specifically, the main achievements in policy work include regulations on MLE and the school application process, needs assessment for teachers’ professional development, and a bilingual teacher education standard. The preparation of the certification process of bilingual education teachers is underway.

18 Ligita Grigule, Shaping the Multilingual Learning Environment: The Case of Multilingual Education Pilot Project in Georgia, in: *Journal of Teacher Education for Sustainability* 1/2009, pp. 50-64, here: p. 54.

deadlines. It is still unclear when and how the process of introducing MLE should take place.

Thirdly, the HCNM has been involved in facilitating the cultural and linguistic immersion of youth in a Georgian-speaking environment (the “Argonauti” programme). This intervention has proven to be effective, since between 2009 and 2011, 20 of the 74 students from Samtskhe-Javakheti who took part in the programme entered university. In 2012, this programme is being implemented for the last time, with the support of the HCNM, for 45 students from Samtskhe-Javakheti and for the first time from Kvemo-Kartli as well. The Ministry of Education and Science is interested in taking on the programme from 2013, providing a promising prospect of sustainability for this project.

Finally, work with communities via awareness-raising campaigns has recently been reactivated, the aim being to win the support of parents and communities for MLE. A common misunderstanding is that MLE is about speaking the state language, and perhaps even closing down minority schools, with the objective of forcefully assimilating minorities into Georgian society. To address these fears, which are widespread in Samtskhe-Javakheti, local implementing partners discuss the communities’ concerns in meetings with local self-government, parents, school staff, and schoolchildren. Besides providing accurate and up-to-date information, this project allows the HCNM to have access to the local population’s perceptions of the education reform and convey these to the ministry. This project shows the significance of having two-way communication between the ministry and the local educational institutions and communities. It is indeed one thing to develop a policy and quite another to communicate it adequately to the population and adjust the reform process to local needs.

In sum, the policy reform is being implemented steadily, with two areas of visible success. First of all, institutional capacity building has proven to be an effective means of enhancing reform at central level, with important policy documents being developed and endorsed. This is also the case at local level, as is shown by the expansion and growing popularity of the Language Houses and the increasing willingness of schools to embark on MLE. Secondly, state-language training, whether at school within the MLE programme or within the Argonauti programme, has certainly facilitated the access of students from Samtskhe-Javakheti to higher education institutions. Concomitantly, the adaptation of regulations on the unified national exams has made it easier for minority students to enrol.¹⁹

The HCNM’s persistent emphasis over the years on state-language acquisition in Georgia, as well as other countries such as Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, raises the question of how important it is to promote minority languages as well. In the spirit of The Hague Recommendations, which largely focus on minority languages, the HCNM raises the issue whenever

19 *Assessment of Civic Integration of National Minorities*, cited above (Note 5), p. 47.

minority languages are threatened. But claiming that a minority language, for example Armenian, has the right to receive the status of regional language has not been regarded as a useful tool for integration.²⁰ Instead, the HCNM has sought to strike a balance between state-language acquisition and minority-language preservation, with an eye on the goal of integrating minorities into society. MLE provided the tools for such a balance. Consequently, the fact that the Ministry of Education and Science engaged in MLE could be taken as a guarantee of respect for the minorities' identity and culture. There has nevertheless been a tendency in recent years for the government to invest primarily in the state language.²¹ These measures might constitute gradual steps towards monolingualism in Georgia, which is a much-feared scenario, especially in Samtskhe-Javakheti. The HCNM is closely monitoring the development of the MLE reform. At the time of writing, the parliamentary elections have just been held and it remains to be seen which direction the new government will take to accommodate the needs of minorities in Georgian society in matters of language education.

Other Important Areas of Engagement: Legal Assistance, Media Development, and Training of Civil Servants

Besides language education, the HCNM has engaged in other areas to enhance the participation of minorities in public life, viz. by strengthening their capacity in local administration and media and by facilitating legal assistance for them.

From 2004 to 2006, the HCNM commissioned training for employees of the local administrations of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo-Kartli in handling inter-ethnic tensions in their day-to-day work. While there is no evidence that this intervention was directly conducive to reform, the fact is that the following year the government decided to establish a National School of Administration that was named after the late Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania and based in the town of Kutaisi. The goal was to involve national minorities in the decision-making process and increase the participation of national minorities in governmental structures (parliament, government, local administration, and public services) through training. In 2006, with the aim of making this initiative more sustainable, the HCNM reached an agreement with the Ministry of Education and Science and the Zurab Zhvania School to include this training in its curriculum. In the same year, the HCNM's implementing partner provided the training of trainers for the Zhvania School's personnel and the first courses on management of inter-ethnic relations for

20 This question emerged in 2007, when Armenian-minority representatives asked the HCNM to look into the question of granting Armenian the status of a regional language.

21 This is shown by various measures, such as the initiative "Georgian language for future success", as well as by the heavy emphasis of the Zhurab Zhvania School for Public Administration's work, and that of the Language Houses in minority regions, on state language acquisition (for information about the school, see below).

the school's students. However, the subject was abandoned during the curriculum revision in 2010 because it was arguably not tailored to the day-to-day practice of the civil servants. While the course probably included some excessively abstract components, it could have been redesigned instead of being abandoned completely. Another somewhat regrettable development is that in 2011, the ministry partly redesigned the profile of the Zurab Zhvania School to emphasize state-language training for minority civil servants in general, including school personnel. While this measure fits in with the government's recent efforts to strengthen the acquisition of the state language, it is a pity that minority civil servants' education for their day-to-day work has been pushed into the background. As a result, support for civil servants appears to have contributed to institutional reform but since 2010 has been less of a priority for the government.

Interventions by means of legal assistance and support for media development focused on capacity building in civil society in the minority regions. These proved to be successful, as they had an impact at least at local level.

From 2003 to 2010, the HCNM supported the creation and capacity building of legal-aid offices in four locations (Akhaltzikhe, Akhalkalaki, and Ninotsminda in Samtskhe-Javakheti, and Marneuli in Kvemo-Kartli) to help the population sort out contentious issues, in particular the land issue. For areas relying heavily on agriculture, the status of land and the opportunities to privatize it, for example through leases, is crucial for the population's subsistence. Shortly after independence, under Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a discriminatory law on land prevented representatives of national minorities from privatizing land. Later this law was amended to allow limited land privatization only within a 21-km belt adjacent to the Azeri border. While this law was annulled in the late 1990s, the privatization and land-lease processes have lacked transparency ever since. Legal-aid offices have offered consultations free of charge, in particular on this issue. The project has proved only partly sustainable as the four offices, while still functioning, are facing a structural funding shortfall.

Another area of support was media development, where a successful pilot scheme for central and local government was carried out. This project, which ran from 2004 to 2009, and was undertaken by the OSCE Mission to Georgia for a limited period, consisted of re-broadcasting Georgian national news in the Azeri and Armenian languages. In this project, the HCNM sought to implement the *Oslo Recommendations regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities* (1998), which had a component dealing with media, and, even more thoroughly, the *Guidelines on the use of Minority Languages in the Broadcast Media* (2003).²² By 2007, the state-owned "Public Broadcasting Company" had taken over part of this project, by launching a ten-minute

22 Cf. *Guidelines on the use of Minority Languages in the Broadcast Media*, October 2003, p. 17, and *The Oslo Recommendations regarding the Linguistic Rights of National Minorities & Explanatory Note*, February 1998, pp. 6-7.

news programme for each of the five largest ethnic minority communities, i.e. Azeri and Armenian as well as Russian, Ossetian, and Abkhaz. Towards the end of the project, the local staff developed not only national news digests, but also high-quality local news in Azeri. At the time of writing, daily news broadcasts in all these languages except Russian are still being transmitted and local news is broadcast regularly.

Other media-related projects provided training for local journalists and support for two local TV stations in Bolnisi and Marneuli, the latter of which is still functioning.²³

Conclusion

Over the past ten years, Georgia has gone through a critical period of its history, marked by a decisive move towards reform in a number of key areas. It is safe to say that the HCNM's assistance has been instrumental in Georgia's committing itself to some of these reforms, particularly on language education. By launching projects, the HCNM has developed hands-on options and practices for addressing systemic causes of the isolation of Georgia's two largest minorities. As the example of Georgia shows, the HCNM has designed and implemented projects in a largely pragmatic way and adjusted them to the local context and dynamics, primarily by mobilizing the available resources among implementing partners with the aim of encouraging willingness from the government to embark on reform.

The HCNM's involvement in projects over many years can be regarded as an important achievement given the difficult political context that prevails in Georgia. The conflicts, in particular with Georgia's breakaway regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia which culminated in the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia, have formed the backdrop to the HCNM's involvement in projects in Georgia in at least two respects. To counter the risk of their spilling over into the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo-Kartli, the HCNM set up a wide range of projects to reduce the conflict potential in these tense regions and received the support of the government.

The government was supportive of the HCNM's assistance from the outset and has expressed its support repeatedly over the years. As is shown by the new National Security Concept, the government is making efforts to integrate minorities and sees this as a key element of its security strategy. However, the government has also shown "mixed feelings" towards minorities in that it has been wary of the political connections that ethnic Armenians in particular have had with Russia, and more generally because minorities are an element in the balance of power in the Caucasus.

The reform implementation itself has proceeded at various speeds, depending on the government's priorities. These variations, ranging from stag-

23 For more information on the work of Marneuli TV, see: <http://www.marneulitv.ge/eng>.

nation to sudden accelerations and quickly-taken measures, have made project assistance a process in which patience and perseverance were needed from the HCNM, experts, and partners.

While the pragmatic approach of the HCNM has been acknowledged as a factor in his success, notably by the Council of Europe and the ECMI, long-term strategies and multiple options should be developed further by the HCNM to encourage the takeover of projects by local stakeholders. If this goal is to be achieved, regular assessment of projects on the ground is essential.

To what extent can we speak of sustainability in the case of the HCNM's project assistance for Georgia? Of the various indicators for sustainability, the most significant one as shown by the case of the HCNM's assistance to Georgia is the government's practice of taking over initiatives, turning them into policy and consistently committing itself to policy implementation. Without proper and sustainable government ownership, projects, whether launched by the HCNM or whoever, often only just survive the funding cycle of usually two to three years, five at most, and then dry out. The HCNM's long-standing and consistent support for language education shows that it has taken ten years to embark on MLE reform and start to implement it.

Secondly, the HCNM's assistance for MLE reform illustrates – with some results at least while the process is still underway – that initiatives are sustainable when stakeholders at both central and local level have their capacity built or undertake to pursue capacity building. This is partly the case when personnel from the Ministry of Education and Science are being trained for MLE, although the frequent staff turnover makes continuity of efforts very challenging. In the minority regions, the Language Houses have been revitalized, which is good news, but this should be the subject of intensive and continuing capacity building to solve the current work overload. At school level, the tireless efforts to train teachers have brought some results and should be complemented by a strategy of lifelong learning and long-term professional development. This having been said, the Georgian-language skills among both the Armenian and Azeri minorities remain poor and hamper their full participation in the social, economic, cultural, and political life of the country. Another area of HCNM assistance at local level, namely through legal-aid offices, has survived the HCNM funding cycle thanks to the resourcefulness of local lawyers in finding alternative sources of funding, which ideally should be ensured by the government.

Thirdly, the growing dialogue between government and civil society, especially on language education, is another indicator of sustainability. Thanks to the mediation of the HCNM's staff, with an instrumental role being played by the Tbilisi-based National Programme Manager, communication and co-operation is developing between the Ministry of Education and Science and local implementing partners – whether experts in language edu-

cation, specialists in student exchange programmes, or grass-roots organizations – which have built up trust among the communities they work with. The HCNM's experience has shown that this co-operation should be encouraged, also in the sensitive and still little-explored field of gender equality, especially with respect to the access of girls and boys, and adult females and males, to education services.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the decrease in inter-ethnic tensions is an indicator that the HCNM's conflict-prevention activities have been productive. Although the multiplicity of factors affecting the stability or instability of an area do not allow us to draw a causal link between stability and assistance, inter-ethnic tensions have undoubtedly decreased at least in Samtskhe-Javakheti in recent years. Now the climate is less tense than it was in 2008. In Kvemo-Kartli, while the situation has mostly been calmer than in Samtskhe-Javakheti, some risks of growing tension might arise, notably on religious grounds.²⁴

In this context, important challenges lie in the still limited participation of minorities in the social, economic, cultural, and political life of the country. To address these challenges, the HCNM will continue to encourage the Georgian government to pursue and consistently implement policies of full-fledged participation by minorities, which is the most effective way to ensure stability for the benefit of Georgian society as a whole.

24 Cf. Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD)/Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA)/Saferworld, *Peace, Security and Stability in Kvemo-Kartli – A Community-Informed Strategy*, March 2011.