



European Armenian Federation for Justice and Democracy

28/11/2012

Madam Chair,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

My name is Slava Mezhdoian, and I am the representative of Georgian office of the European Armenian Federation based in Brussels. I am Georgian of Armenian origin. Today, I would like to speak about the challenges and problems the Armenian community of Georgia faces. Armenians are the third, largest community with approximately 250 000 members. The vast majority of members of the Armenian community in Georgia can be characterised as belonging to ethnic, linguistic and religious minority. Armenians in Georgia are densely populated in the regions of Samtskhe-Javakheti and sparsely in other regions, mainly in big cities. 'The issues of Armenians of Javakheti and those who live in big cities are somewhat different from each other.

Although, in the last years- the Georgian authorities have made some progress in the field of protection of minority rights, a number of major problems in the field of education, preservation. of national identity, religious rights and political participation still remain.

The participation of Armenians and other minorities in the process of state building is poor. The legislation does not, provide any possibility to establish their own political parties or have quota in the legislation bodies, which. could allow Armenians to elect their representatives from the community to the legislative bodies and 'provide effective advocacy of their issues without having political parties. The low level of participation of persons belonging to the Armenian community at all levels of government and 'especially in the capital of Georgia where Georgian citizens of Armenian origin constitute the second largest group proves the unwillingness of the Georgian authorities to allow for meaningful political participation of minorities. Moreover, the majority of Georgians of Armenian origin living in the Javakheti region, where they constitute 95%-of the local population, do not have sufficient command of the State language and this is used as an excuse to deprive them of any possibility of participation in public affairs. The Government of Georgia should consider the possibility of allowing the use of minority languages in local administration in those regions where the minorities constitute a significant part of the local population. It should be mentioned that the Constitution of Georgia, in the case of Abkhazia allows use of the Abkhazian language at local level. Thus, why other minorities which densely live in certain regions should not be allowed to enjoy the same right?

Armenian schools in Georgia are fully funded by the government, something that Georgia inherited from the Soviet period. But since its independence, significant number of Armenian schools has been closed through administrative steps. Only in 2011 the number of Armenian schools in Georgia was decreased almost by 20%. This is considered as a hidden and soft policy by the Georgian authorities who lead Armenians to assimilation.

Instances of direct discrimination concern the religious rights. Although the equality and nondiscrimination have been included among the fundamental provisions of the Georgian Constitution, only the Georgian Orthodox Church receives state finances from the budget. Moreover, only the Georgian Church is able to secure restitution of property confiscated during the Soviet period. While, the Armenian Apostolic Church has gotten none of its 6 churches that it has been claiming for the last 20 years. We believe that such an approach vis-à-vis non-Georgian churches are discriminatory and constitute direct discrimination.

In conclusion I would like to stress that all the above mentioned facts cause significant barriers for the formation of inclusive democracy in Georgia, and impede its development in the long-term.

Our recommendations to the Georgian authorities would be:

- - to provide measures that will increase the political participation of national minorities in Georgia at both local and central levels of government;
- to intensify efforts directed at teaching the State language in regions with dense minority population;
- - to allow Armenian language to be second administrative at the level of local government in the region of Javakheti, where ethnic Armenians constitute 95% of the population;
- - to return the property of the Armenian Church and of other religious minorities, confiscated during the Soviet period.

Thank you for your attention.

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