

Armenians Seek Language Rights in Georgia

Author: [Sopho Bukia](#)

For some politicians, allowing official use of minority languages is first step towards separatism.

Local officials in an Armenian-majority area of Georgia have sparked heated discussion by calling on the state to ratify an international treaty that protects minority languages.

Members of the municipal assembly in the southern town of Akhalkalaki said they would write to parliament about the issue. The councillors are members of the Georgian Dream coalition which formed a government after winning elections in October.

Georgia is home to about 250,000 ethnic Armenians, around five per cent of its total population. Most live in the mountainous Samtskhe-Javakheti region, bordering on Armenia and Turkey.

In the southeast, another substantial minority, 280,000 Azeris, live along the border with Azerbaijan.

The European Charter for Minority or Regional Languages, ECRML, commits member states in the Council of Europe to make education, court proceedings and state services available in minority languages in areas where they are traditionally spoken. Georgia pledged to ratify the charter when it joined the Council of Europe in 1999, but it has not yet done so.

“We believe the protection of national minorities in Georgia’s regions is an important element of building Georgia,” said a draft statement from the councillors in Akhalkalaki, who belong to the Republican faction within Georgian Dream. “We also note that protecting and developing regional languages and the languages of national minorities must not take place at the expense of the state language.”

Council chairman Hamlet Movsesyan said the deputies had not yet agreed the final text.

“This statement is still being worked on, and a final version will be sent to parliament. It does not emphasise the Armenian language. This statement is about ratification of the European charter,” he said.

The Akhalkalaki assembly members said they did not consult their Georgian Dream allies in Tbilisi before raising the issue.

The move has revived concerns about the implications of people from ethnic minorities failing to learn Georgian, the sole state language.

Although the statement does not mention Armenian, the Georgian media interpreted it as a clear demand for official status for that language.

“Georgian Dream Republicans demand status for Armenian language,” the ExpressNews Agency reported on March 15.

Van Baiburt, an adviser to President Mikhail Saakashvili, told reporters that although he did not think ECRML would encourage separatism, it was still too soon to ratify it.

“At a time when less than ten per cent of people from ethnic minorities speak the Georgian language, naturally it is not desirable to ratify the charter. It would turn out we were passing laws to totally stop instruction in Georgian,” he said.

Tina Khidasheli, a member of parliament from the ruling Georgian Dream coalition, denied that ratifying ECRML would mean that state institutions no longer had to operate in Georgian.

Vano Merabishvili, a former prime minister and now general secretary of Saakashvili’s United National Movement, UNM, warned that giving official status to regional languages could encourage separatism. He said the UNM government had spent nine years trying to stop separatism gaining a foothold.

David Darchiashvili, a legislator from the UNM, now the minority faction in parliament, pointed out that many other Council of Europe members had not ratified the treaty.

He said Georgia should wait until it was secure from external threats before exposing itself to domestic risks.

Referring to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which have claimed independence since conflicts in the 1990s, Darchiashvili said, “When 20 per cent of your territory is occupied, and then you hear statements from Moscow that Georgia should be ‘Tbilisi Province’ [ie part of Russia], then it is not in our interest to raise

these matters.”

Paata Zakareishvili, State Minister for Reintegration, pointed out that it was Saakashvili himself who committed Georgia to ratifying ECRML 15 years ago, when he was head of parliament’s legal committee.

“Sooner or later, Georgia will have to join the charter, otherwise we will not achieve any of the European integration that Mr Saakashvili talks about so often. Also, the plan for a more liberal visa regime with the European Union cannot be signed until we accede to the charter,” he said.

“So this is a difficult issue which must be considered by the public, the government and parliament. When we talk about moving closer to the European Union and European institutions, we need to discuss the difficulties that are preventing us from taking steps in that direction.”

Sopho Bukia is an IWPR-trained journalist who works for the Rustavi-2 broadcasting company.

Location: Georgia

Topic: Social justice

Focus: Кавказ

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/armenians-seek-language-rights-georgia>