

Georgia: Orthodoxy in Schools

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Religious minorities say Orthodox creed is given unfair advantage in schools.

Muraz Mirzoyev, an ethnic Yezidi, was a first form pupil at the Davitiani Georgian private school, when his father forbade him to attend religion lessons after he found out that Christian studies was being taught there and Orthodox rituals practiced at the school.

“This form of schooling discriminates against other nationalities,” said Muraz’s father Agit Mirzoyev, who is also head of the Georgian Yezidi Kurds’ Union. “I don’t want my son to come under the influence of some other religion. The management of the school understood my decision.”

Yezidis are a small minority in Georgia and practice their own faith. Told not to attend classes where Christianity is being taught, Muraz went home during religious studies lessons or waited for them to end in an adjoining classroom.

“Muraz felt uncomfortable, because he could not understand what was going on at the lessons while he wasn’t there,” said Mirzoyev. “This one hour was enough to make him feel ill at ease.”

Muraz is now nine years old and a fourth-form pupil. He still skips lessons in the history of religion and his father does not allow him to go on outings with his classmates.

“I prefer him to stay at home instead of visiting Georgian cultural monuments that are presented as symbols of the Christian religion,” his father said.

Religious education is becoming a contentious issue for minorities in Georgia. According to a law on general education passed in April 2005, religious studies is not a compulsory subject on the curriculum, which means it is up to the schools themselves to decide whether to provide lessons in Orthodoxy or not.

The education ministry has no exact figures on the number of schools teaching the subject in Georgia, where Orthodox Christians comprise around 80 per cent of the population. The ministry’s press office said only that “most Georgian schools teach the history of religion”.

IWPR telephoned ten schools in Tbilisi and found that all of them had the subject in their curricula.

In its 2006 International Religious Freedom Report, the US Department of State struck a note of concern, saying that in contradiction of legislation passed in 2005, “Teachers often began most courses, including mathematics and science, by leading the class in a recitation of Orthodox prayers. Those students who did not participate were sometimes punished. ”

The report said that Orthodox icons and religious pictures were often hung in classrooms and some schools had chapels where students were encouraged to pray.

Bella Tshipuria, deputy minister of education and science, denied there was a problem.

“No one is going to make anyone attend religion lessons,” she said. “Pupils have the discretion to decide whether to attend the lessons or not.”

However, language teacher Lamara Pashayeva told IWPR that those pupils who missed religious studies lessons were suffering as a result.

“One Yezidi boy who did not attend lessons on religion was often beaten and bullied by his classmates,” she said.

“Unfortunately, his family won’t make it public. I can only say that the form-master asked me for help, because the religious studies teacher did not resolve the conflict.”

Arnold Stepanian, chief of the Multinational Georgia organisation which defends minority rights, said his organisation had recorded up to 15 cases over the past two years where non-Georgian pupils had their rights violated by classmates or religious studies teachers.

“During lessons, religious studies teachers called Muslims, Jews and Kurds ‘henchmen of the Devil’,” said Stepanian. “Unfortunately, parents often don’t speak up.”

“The trouble is that many parents do not know their rights, thinking that it’s normal for their children to have their rights violated for the sake of Orthodoxy,” said Beka Mindiashvili, an expert at the Religious Tolerance Centre in the Georgian ombudsman’s office, who himself used to teach religious studies in a school.

Tsipuria said her ministry had never heard of conflicts related to the teaching of religion in schools.

“If there really is a conflict on religious grounds somewhere, this violates the law on general education,” said Tsipuria. “If these facts are confirmed, the ministry’s inspectors will respond to them.”

However, the ombudsman’s office said the education ministry had overlooked an incident that attracted a lot of attention last year in the town of Vale in Akhaltsikhe district, which has a large Catholic population.

“On April 13, 2006, the ombudsman’s office received a complaint from Catholic pupils in Vale’s secondary school No.1, who accused their teachers of religion, geography and Georgian language of a negative attitude towards them,” said a press release by the office.

“The religious studies teacher hurt a Catholic schoolgirl’s ear because she had not made the sign of the cross the way Orthodox Christians do,” said Mindiashvili.

Gocha Khitarishvili, the father of the girl, told IWPR that things improved after the ombudsman’s office intervened.

Levan Abashidze of the Georgian parliament's research department argues that "when a school decides voluntarily to teach religious studies, the subject becomes compulsory for all pupils of the school".

"Schools should teach a history of various religions, while most of the textbooks the schools use nowadays are trying to convert people to Orthodoxy," said Abashidze.

Last year, the non-government Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, CIPDD, held a series of workshops for teachers on how religion should be taught in schools.

"It turned out that several of the teachers were intolerant towards people of other faiths," said Bella Beradze of CIPDD. "The participants themselves owned up to this."

Evidence from Georgian schools confirms this.

Catholic priest Father Zurab Kikachishvili cited a case in which a teacher of religious studies in a Gori school made an entire class, including two Catholic pupils, receive communion according to the Orthodox Christian rite.

Marta Samatashvili, who teaches religious studies in secondary school No. 62 in Tbilisi, said, "Religion should be taught very carefully." She said that ethnic Georgian Orthodox Christians and Muslim Azerbaijanis and Kists in her classes studied the history of different religions and not just Orthodoxy.

"Each of us is free to choose his faith," she said. "The Orthodox religion forbids violence against other religions."

Lela Jejelava, coordinator of the inter-religious council of the Georgian Patriarchate, said people who belonged to traditional faith groups could ask to be taught their religion in schools, but there was no legal requirement for this to happen.

Jejelava said the Roman Catholic Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church, and the Jewish and Muslim communities had all refused to register as legal entities because "they don't want to exist as a firm or foundation".

She said teaching of other religions in schools would be out of the question until these faiths obtained a legal status - leaving the Georgian Orthodox Church in a dominant position in Georgia's schools.

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