

Building an Inclusive Society in Georgia

Salome Mukhuradze is the Programme Officer for NIMD's Eastern European Neighbourhood Office. Within this region, NIMD works with politicians from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine. Throughout her career, Salome Mukhuradze has actively promoted the expansion and implementation of successful democratic models for civil society in Georgia.

While preparing for a multiparty dialogue platform on the inclusion of minority communities, I met with different party leaders to explain the importance of participating in this dialogue. Convincing them of the significance of this initiative was not easy. A politician at one such meeting relentlessly questioned NIMD's interest in promoting the issue. "Why do we need NIMD to help us with this?" he asked. "If we do decide to tackle this problem, we can do it ourselves," he said dismissively. This reflected that it was not just a lack of resources that was causing the inactivity of the Georgian political parties, but there also seemed to be a general disinterest on this issue.

Addressing taboos

In Georgia, a small country with huge political and socio-economic problems, the integration of national minorities, mostly Armenians and Azeris, is a sensitive issue. Although, at the time of writing this article, they represented around 16 percent of the population, these minorities have been relatively uninvolved in public and political life. National minorities vote regularly but the level of their political participation is not reflected in the turnout of the elections. A combination of different factors is responsible for this: until very recently, poor infrastructure, especially roads, has impeded regular contact between the rest of Georgia and its capital. And the inability of many national minority citizens to speak the Georgian language has limited their educational opportunities.

Furthermore, prejudices and mutual distrust run high between the majority and minority groups in the country. An example of this was when the results of a study found that between 1990 and 2010 some 25,000 girls had been aborted because of their sex. The general opinion in Georgia was that the minority groups caused the high abortion rate. Georgians were usually regarded as tolerant but when faced with these statistics the blame was cast on the 'non-Georgian' groups for seemingly 'non-Georgian' results.

NIMD opens new pathways for dialogue

Consequently in 2014, in cooperation with the OSCE

High Commissioner on National Minorities office, we created a multiparty platform on national minorities, which brought together both ruling and opposition parties. In the beginning, my colleagues and I were faced with disinterest and resistance. Yet, we continued to explore strategies to increase national minority representation within political parties and the Parliament and generate more inclusive policies.

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Despite encountering many problems along the way in the fall of 2014 we successfully launched a multiparty dialogue platform, with eight political parties, on the issue of the inclusion of minority communities in politics. We decided to hold the discussions in the respective regions, as opposed to working on them remotely from Georgia's capital, Tbilisi. We wanted the political parties to visit the regions and meet the national minority representatives so that they could get a first-hand understanding of the challenges they were facing. Since establishing this multiparty platform, we have facilitated several meetings in the national minority regions, including a breakthrough meeting in the remote town of Akhalkalaki. It is a meeting I will not forget.

For this particular meeting in Akhalkalaki, the national minority representatives arrived an hour early. As my colleague explained, the reason behind their early arrival was that they had to take a van from a neighbouring village that only made two trips daily. That is when I realized just how eager people were to voice their concerns and discuss possible solutions with the leaders of political parties.

Joining forces

Once these representatives settled into the dialogue,

instead of being angry at their circumstances, they were enthusiastic and positively engaged with the politicians. I could see that the political leaders were also very eager and open to listening to them. The representatives expressed their concerns regarding the education system, access to information and the socio-economic situation in the regions. Most participants on both sides agreed that the major challenge to the integration of national minorities, particularly those living together in their own insulated communities, was their poor command of the Georgian language. Inability to speak Georgian also limited their access to public services and isolated them from other citizens. They also touched upon their lack of access to information and media: they often had to rely on foreign news sources for information, such as those from neighbouring Azerbaijan and Armenia.

This eager and animated participation by the leaders of the minority groups made the politicians aware that the prevalent belief that national minorities were not motivated enough to fully integrate with the rest of society was incorrect.

At the meeting one politician even said “we realize that the political and socio-economic exclusion of some groups of society can only lead to a separatism that no-one in this country wants to see anymore.” It was then that I understood that my colleagues at NIMD and I had finally broken through to the leadership of the political parties.

We had managed to convince them of the urgency to act. It was a particularly important issue for Georgia given its history of violent conflict often involving identity-related factors and grievances with strong historical roots. The politicians in the room had come to appreciate that failure to address this issue could have dire consequences.

Uprooting prejudices

Historically, deeply rooted prejudices in Georgian society have stymied progress and created additional barriers to the full integration of different groups. Much of the 1990s saw Georgia engulfed by inter-ethnic and intra-national conflicts. Continued exclusion and segregation could easily generate violence in society and push the country back to this terrible political quagmire.

Putting their ideological differences aside, political parties agreed to join forces to overcome marginalization and become more inclusive. Therefore, as facilitators of the process, we successfully accomplished our goal despite the many challenges we had faced along the way.

Reflecting on this experience, it is evident that bringing both the ruling and opposition parties around the table to discuss the issues faced by national minorities, in an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding laid the foundation for a more transparent and inclusive society. Overcoming the marginalization of underrepresented groups will not only ensure democratic development, but will also strengthen peace and stability in Georgia. Exclusion and discrimination have been recurring threats in Georgia's development in the past few decades, which is why NIMD's work towards a more inclusive political environment is fundamental to ensuring that history does not repeat itself.

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Minority representation is highly important for the stability and inclusivity of any democratic system, and political parties have a key role to play in representing their concerns. Therefore, NIMD assists political parties in fostering inclusive political settlements in fragile and conflict affected countries like Georgia.

Improving the Political Participation of Women in Georgia

Salome Mukhuradze is the Programme Officer for NIMD's Eastern European Neighbourhood Office. Within this region, NIMD works with politicians from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine. Throughout her career, Salome Mukhuradze has actively promoted the expansion and implementation of successful democratic models for civil society in Georgia.

“Women do not belong in politics” is a widely prevalent belief in Georgian politics. Even prominent male politicians, while seeming to defend women's rights, betray their prejudices by dismissively declaring that “women are human beings too”. In addition to these attitudes, the post-conflict socio-economic conditions in the country have largely contributed to the marginalization of women. Due to these hindrances, and prejudices, women in Georgia were unable to fully participate and contribute towards the peace-building efforts and national economic reconstruction that followed the civil war and military conflict that plagued Georgia in the 1990s.

Reforming the political system

Now, despite gender-sensitive legislation, women continue to be underrepresented in public life, and politics in particular. At the time of writing this article, there were only 18 female Members of Parliament (12 percent of all MPs) even though 52 percent of Georgia's population is made up of women. There were even fewer female representatives in local councils.

My colleagues at NIMD and I realised that ensuring the equitable political participation of women was vital to the democratic process. The continued exclusion and marginalisation of women in a conflict-affected setting, such as Georgia, could undermine the stability of the country's democratic development.

Our work on women's empowerment in politics began by assisting partner political parties with the creation of more gender-sensitive political agendas. It took several rounds of meetings, workshops and conferences to convince these parties of the importance of the issue and secure their participation.

The trust that NIMD's team has among political parties in Georgia helped to launch a successful multiparty dialogue on women's political participation

in July 2012. It was the only multiparty platform in the country to enjoy support from both the governing and opposition parties. After months of active collaboration political parties began working jointly on violence against women and gender equality in education, industrial relations, media and budgeting. Moreover, legislative amendments aimed at providing financial incentives for placing more women on party lists were developed for the 2012 parliamentary elections. These legislative amendments were a milestone for political parties and NIMD alike.

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Open and honest dialogue

Despite all these efforts, the actual representation of women in legislatures barely saw an increase and violence against women reached its peak in 2014. Public pressure led politicians to agree that urgent steps had to be taken. But nobody had a specific course of action. We decided to encourage the political parties to take greater ownership of the issue and to develop a joint vision with NIMD for empowering women in politics. In order to facilitate this, in the fall of 2014, we organized an informal high-level meeting.

At the time we did not know that this meeting would go on to be a pivotal moment for women's empowerment in Georgia. To start off, my colleagues and I convinced the leaders of 11 political parties on the urgency for action for the political and public empowerment of Georgian women. To make sure the participants were able to relax and talk in a friendly and supportive atmosphere, we created a confidential space. We were determined to demonstrate both the

urgency and the opportunity to take up the cause of women's empowerment.

The first sign that the meeting would be extraordinary was the unusually large number of male leaders I saw shuffling into the hall alongside the usual groups of women politicians. Normally, this meeting would have only aroused the interest of women. As the meeting progressed I was even more surprised to observe a discernible change in the approach and rhetoric of the male politicians. They all seemed to agree that the inequality and discrimination against women generated violence in society and damaged the sustainable development of the country. Finally, the parties were openly addressing the previously-ignored problem that the political exclusion of the largest part of the population posed a threat to pluralism, diversity and political stability in Georgia.

Inclusion of women takes centre stage

We were off to a good start. As the facilitators, we decided that it would be important to hand over the ownership of the process to the political parties themselves. The politicians recognized that it was vital for them to take the lead, or they risked losing connection with their electorate. Consequently, they decided to join their efforts, co-host a series of conferences on gender equality and draft a multiparty resolution. This was a positive development for Georgia's male-dominated political system.

To follow up this crucial meeting, the different political parties came together to organize a multiparty conference on women's participation in politics. It was the first time that such a diverse spectrum of Georgian political parties had agreed to jointly host a conference on this issue. After the conference, political parties, with the support of NIMD's team, developed and adopted a Multiparty Resolution on Necessary Measures to Increase Women's Political Participation in Georgia. The Resolution, signed by ten political parties, called for the consideration of women's representation when implementing the electoral reforms. It also called for the adoption of special measures to increase women's representation in politics in general, including the use of public funds to aid their political empowerment.

Although Georgia still has a long way to go before it achieves full-fledged gender equality, stability and security, it is slowly accepting that intolerance and

the exclusion of women pose a grave challenge towards the inclusive, democratic development of the country. And the work done by NIMD and its partners in Georgia has helped to move the debate from the periphery to the centre stage of politics where it belongs.

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Promoting women's participation is a goal of all NIMD's country programmes. This story demonstrates that women have an exceptional potential to bridge the gap between political parties in polarized environments; and promoting their participation in politics contributes to inclusive and stable democracies.