Currently, in Tajikistan there is no clearly formulated ethnic policy, it is replaced by only separate decrees, statements and projects, said Muslimbek Buriev, a participant of the CABAR.asia School of Analytics.

The material was prepared as part of the internship program for participants of the CABAR.asia School of Analytics in Tbilisi (Georgia).

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Short overview of the article:

- The legacy of civil war does not allow accepting diversity, but only leaves a right for the public to rely on unity;
- There is no legislative base providing the groundwork for minority civil integration projects;
- The key problem among the ethnic minorities is knowledge of the Tajik (state language) language;
- The experience of Georgia shows the success of state integration programs;
- Issues related to ethnic minorities in Tajikistan are rarely discussed today.
Issues related to ethnic minorities in Tajikistan are rarely discussed today. The expert community and state structures quite possibly do not see relevance in the given problem, and, probably do not perceive it as a problem. However, at the moment there is no clearly formulated ethnic policy in the country, it is replaced by only separate decrees, statements and projects.

Ethnic minorities are in the position of self-regulation, and some groups are completely isolated from the general political agenda, which negatively affects the process of their integration. This article will try to consider the main benefits of the possible introduction of a common ethnic policy in the country and why it still does not exist.

Are there ethnic policies in Tajikistan?

During the last years before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which served as a start for many political processes in the Central Asian region, the question of identity began to arise in Tajikistan. The emergence of such an agenda can be indicated by the adoption of the first law on language in 1989, which entered into force even during the existence of the Tajik SSR. This was the first factor that influenced the formation of the Tajik identity. The
second factor will long be echoed in the discussion of many political issues – the civil war of 1992-1997.

This period is characterized by aggression not only against various ethnic groups, but also with hostility between Tajiks from different regions of the country. The territory of the republic was essentially divided between supporters of the warring factions.

After signing of the peace agreements in 1997, the new authorities saw the main task in uniting people under one flag and not allowing such clashes to continue. Thus, the day of signing the agreements on June 26, 1997 was declared as a national holiday – “Unity Day”. This step then formed the basic approach to the issues of ethnic minorities in the country: “We all live in Tajikistan, which means we are – one nation.”

“Unity came out on top, while the specific rights of ethnic minorities went into the shadows”.[1]
After the civil war, the authorities of Tajikistan take seriously the perception of the country’s population as one people with common characteristics. Thus, to talk about any differences between ethnic groups at the highest level is considered as kind of a bad manner, since, from viewpoint of the authorities, such rhetoric “in the long term could create a conflict situation”.

Nevertheless, it is not correct to say that the state completely closes its eyes to the issues of ethnic minorities. The Constitution of the Republic of Tajikistan recognizes the rights of ethnic groups to self-identification, the Russian language is recognized as the language of interethnic communication, and the Gorno-Badakhshan region in the east of the country, populated mainly by the Pamir ethnic group, received legal autonomy.

Moreover, schools in Russian and Uzbek languages are still functioning in the country. In addition, Tajikistan has acceded to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Convention on the Rights of Persons Relating to National Minorities.

Such measures allow us to say that ethnic policy in Tajikistan does exist, but as a combination of individual initiatives, and not as a single doctrine.

There are no approved standards and principles of such a policy, so it can now be described as being of a symbolic nature. The unity of the people of Tajikistan in the understanding of current politicians still contradicts the acceptance of the fact that representatives of many other nations live in the country. This may look, on the one hand, as a way of creating and strengthening the (often Tajik) identity in the minds of people in the country, and, on the other hand, as ignoring problems related to ethnic minority issues.

**Problems of ethnic politics**

As already noted, Tajikistan is a party to the main international treaties relating to the observance of minority rights. However, in domestic law, the situation is not entirely simple.

Currently, the law does not provide a definition of what is recognized by an ethnic minority from the point of view of policy makers in Tajikistan.[2] There is also no formulated procedural order to protect the rights and freedoms of the ethnic minorities’ members.

Estimates of the situation with ethnic minorities in Tajikistan currently vary. Moreover, such assessments concern aspects that do not contradict each other.

For example, regarding the Uzbeks, who represent the largest ethnic group after the Tajiks
themselves, it can be said that they are fully integrated into Tajik society. From an objective point of view, this can be explained by the closeness of the culture and traditions of Tajiks and Uzbeks, as well as adherence to one Islamic trend, – Sunnism of the Hanafi madhhab.

From another point of view, this does not diminish the importance of such factors as, for example, problems of proficiency in the Tajik language, as well as the low representation of Uzbek-speaking citizens in state structures, including parliament and the courts. These problems are common to many ethnic minorities in Tajikistan.

There is also the problem of awareness of their legal status by ethnic minorities. Back in the early 2000s, a comprehensive study was conducted in Tajikistan, organized by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and the local Soros Foundation.

One of the objectives of this project was to identify the degree of effectiveness of access to the judiciary system for different ethnic groups. As a result, it turned out that unfamiliarity with the Tajik language, coupled with the lack of information and education in their native language, puts ethnic minorities in an unequal position in comparison to the titular nation.[3] This can lead to adverse consequences, increasing the isolation processes of certain ethnic groups.

It would seem that these problems were revealed at the beginning of the new millennium, however, they are relevant still in our days. In 2015, at the 54th session of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the report on Tajikistan sounded the same aspects related to problems of access to education and unfamiliarity with the state language.[4]

And many recommendations indicated the need to build a strategy to solve one or another problem related to ethnic minorities. That is, an integrated and comprehensive approach is needed, in particular, to increase the effectiveness of the ethnic policy of Tajikistan and avoid marginalization of ethnic groups and reduction of their participation in the political and public life of the country.

**Pamir**

A special situation exists in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO), which is mainly inhabited by the representatives of Pamir-speaking ethnic groups. This group has its own languages that are different from Tajik, and in terms of religion, they are mostly Shiite, Ismaili madhhab. There have been many discussions about this region, especially in recent years due to conflict situations that occasionally arise on its territory.
Now the overall situation is calm, however, in recent years, GBAO, at least at the level of the central government, is characterized as the most conflict-prone point in the country. Naturally, perceiving the region only in conjunction with risks to internal security can only worsen the situation of an already established mutual distrust.

The Pamiris can be identified as the group that “suffered” from the processes of national construction in the early 1990s. The fact is that in the Tajik passport in the “nationality” column all Pamiris are classified as Tajiks, unlike other ethnic groups living in Tajikistan, and for some representatives this causes deep disapproval.[5] Also, according to the population, the state is not taking any steps towards preserving the Pamiri languages. As a result, their ethnicity is not officially recognized, and there is no cultural support. And it is quite likely that for any ethnic group this may cause serious discontent with the policies of the state authorities.

The way to a solution can be found, first of all, by moving away from conflict-oriented rhetoric to measures aimed at cultural exchange between the two ethnic groups. At the same time, it is also not worthwhile to completely belittle any differences, since this violates the right to self-identification, which the ethnic group seeks to preserve. In addition, not only recognition of this right for them within the framework of legislation, both local and international, but also possible implementation of projects aimed at mutual awareness of cultural peculiarities, active participation in the state, and in the regional development can
reduce tensions and positively affect the social integration process of the Pamir ethnic group.

**Georgian experience**

Comparing in this respect, Georgia and Tajikistan can encounter many differences, both in terms of the political situation and in terms of historical development. Currently, In Georgia, there are a lot more problems associated with ethnic minorities than in Tajikistan.

Firstly, the situation is generally complicated by two regions of the country, which in fact have been outside the jurisdiction of the Georgian government for more than 10 years now – Abkhazia and South Ossetia. From the perspective of some experts, the fact that these territories are “blocked” it does not allow government programs to address ethnic issues to be implemented in these territories. At the moment, unfortunately, this problem remains unresolved.

Secondly, there is a large group of ethnic Armenians, about 100 thousand people living in the territory of Samtskhe-Javakheti region, and Azerbaijanis with a high concentration, about 200 thousand people, in the region of Kvemo-Kartli. Both Armenians and Azerbaijanis have difficulties with knowledge of the Georgian language. This situation is problematic so far, especially given the fact that in addition to Georgian, no other language has the official status fixed by the constitution or other provisions.

Thirdly, in the northern part of the country, in the Kakheti region there is a group of Kists who are Muslims and are related to the Ingush people. Since Kakheti is located near the Georgian-Russian border, the Kists have connections with the population of Chechnya and Ingushetia. However, this group has no problems with the knowledge of the Georgian language, but they are often referred to as a risk group within the discourse on religious radicalism.

These are just some of the ethnic groups that have certain difficulties with integration, for example, there are also Meskhetian Turks, Assyrians, Yezidi Kurds and Romance.

Nowadays, the Georgian government has many tasks to complete related to ethnic minorities. But the potential for solving them is much greater. So, unlike in Tajikistan, the legislation of Georgia contains clearly defined norms for protection against discrimination. Article 142 of the Criminal Code of Georgia contains items that are criminalizing both incitement of ethnic hatred and any direct or indirect rights violations based on racial, ethnic or linguistic differences. In the Criminal Code of Tajikistan, the word
discrimination is mentioned only twice: first it is mentioned in the article of crimes committed during the armed conflict,[9] the second - in the case of torture during the interrogation.[10]

From 2015 to 2020, in Georgia the National Concept of Tolerance and Civic Integration is operating, which is aimed at addressing issues related to education, political participation, access to information, preservation of culture and language: everything in terms of the situation of ethnic minorities. Within the framework of this concept, the Georgian government allocated about 300 teachers to teach the Georgian language in regions inhabited by ethnic minorities, which contributed to an improvement in the level of knowledge of the Georgian language among ethnic minorities.[11] Also, the 4 + 1 program is currently in operation for those who want to study at Georgian universities, but do not speak the language. Under this program, students who had been enrolled to study at one of the universities is passing a one-year intensive study of the Georgian language.

The two directions: legal status and language as well as in Tajikistan in Georgia are the most important areas for working with ethnic minorities, and the latter has done a lot in this regard. But it is worth noting that the programs and bills of the Georgian government were developed with the assistance of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), which provided many recommendations for the Georgian policy regarding all
minority groups.

Moreover, at present, there are many international and non-governmental organizations in Georgia, such as, for example, the Caucasus Institute for Peace Democracy and Development (CIPDD), which are engaged in the integration of ethnic, religious and sexual minorities. At the same time, state structures work closely with similar organizations, since the organizational and financial resources of the government are limited. Thus, the government receives a lot of support from the international community, which allows it to move towards solving ethnic issues.

**Results and recommendations**

The main problem of ethnic minority issues in Tajikistan is their integration. This includes integration in education, political participation, employment and many other aspects.

In Tajikistan, any issues related to these aspects are discussed, but without any reservations on ethnic specificity. As a result, any differences, cultural, linguistic or ethnic, are relegated to the background or completely ignored, while a feeling of unity and involvement in the country's public and political life is required from everyone.

As a result, ethnic minorities are in an uncertain position: they accept Tajikistan as their homeland, but do not understand what their status is in this country. To solve this problem, the following can be done:

- To develop a domestic legal framework for the protection of minority rights, followed by an information campaign to ensure access of ethnic minorities to information about their legal status.
- To create a study program of the state language for those who do not know it or have difficulty with understanding it.
- It is necessary to take into account the specifics of the fact that, it is necessary to teach the Tajik language precisely as a foreign language, which will be significantly different from the usual methods of teaching it in schools.
- To establish a cultural exchange between the nations of Tajikistan through events, special creative evenings and so on. Avoid the isolation of such events. Demonstrate awareness of the importance of the value of the languages and cultures of the ethnic groups inhabiting Tajikistan.
- To start the process of discussing ethnic issues at the highest state levels. Create a concept for the integration of ethnic minorities in Tajikistan.
- To establish closer cooperation with independent research centers to study the current
situation, as well as with non-governmental organizations for the implementation of programs.

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Unity is Primary Task – Diversity is Secondary? Features and Omissions of Ethnic Policy in Tajikistan


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