

Some aspects of underemployment of ethnic minorities in Georgia's civil service

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Access to civil service employment remains restricted for non-dominant ethnic groups in Georgia. Despite the country's declared policy of equal opportunities, its public sector employment is a stark manifestation of systemic marginalization and structural discrimination of non-dominant ethnic groups. Central government bodies such as ministries, agencies and state legal entities are distinctly mono-ethnic while local governments employ small numbers of non-dominant ethnic group representatives, where the ratio of these groups is lower than their ratio in the population of the respective municipality.

This is often explained by the fact that non-dominant ethnic groups lack state language skills, which can objectively be considered a valid argument. However, over the past years, there is a sharp increase in the number of young people from these groups who have mastered the state language thanks to the state-sponsored 1+4 programme. Regrettably, this has not translated into the increased employment of ethnic group representatives in the public sector.

The second argument put forward to explain the underemployment of ethnic groups in the public sector is their low qualifications. The argument can simply be rejected if one looks at the numbers of qualified personnel who have graduated from the 1+4 state programme. A closer look at such reasoning may reveal implicit systemic and deeply rooted marginalizing, discriminating and diminishing attitudes and narratives with regard to non-dominant ethnic groups. Unfortunately, we still need to reiterate that it is not possible for an entire ethnic group to be unqualified for the public service.

The third, and seemingly the most solid, argument maintains that civil service is a neutral structure in political, cultural and ethnic terms, which recruits on the basis of merit. However, on many occasions questions have been raised around the neutrality and objectivity of recruitment procedures in Georgia's public service. Moreover, even if the public service recruitment system were the most sophisticated, perfect and neutral, the country should have concrete policies and vision aimed at increasing minority employment in the public sector following the best practices of Western countries, and especially given the low quality of public education delivered by the state to non-dominant ethnic groups.¹ Such policies and vision should be developed based on reliable studies and research findings rather than political leaders' personal initiatives.

It is regrettable that the Georgian Statistics Office does not segregate employment data by ethnicity. Nor does the Public Service Development Agency publish such segregated data. One argument behind this is the state's wish not to differentiate its citizens by various signs and their identity. At a glance, this reminds us of modern Western approaches but one cannot

¹<https://netgazeti.ge/news/191741/>

consider this position Western, modern and progressive without looking at statistical data of the Western countries.

Due to limited research resources and the impossibility to carry out in-depth research, this article cannot speak in detail about practices in the Western states. However, based on quick observations, the article will refer to the statistical data from two most Western - in terms of geography and ideology, and liberal - in terms of the economy and policies, countries.

The US Bureau of Labor Statistics offers employment data segregated by ethnicity², according to which unemployment among African-Americans in the USA is double the level of unemployment among white people.³ Apart from this, one in five employed African Americans is employed in the public sector.⁴ Moreover, multiple studies and statistical data confirm that the US public sector has historically served as an economic pillar for non-white families and communities.⁵ Interestingly, although the public sector in the USA employs a large number of non-dominant ethnic groups, it is commonly criticized for hiring ethnic group members at the bottom of the career ladder. The phrase “black people are the last ones hired and the first ones fired” is commonly used in the USA. This, in essence, means that even during the slightest crisis, this segment of the population is the first to lose jobs whereas in the times of economic revival they are the last to get hired. This was confirmed by a study conducted in 2017, according to which the layoffs in the public sector in 2003-2013 hit African Americans most.⁶ The US Bureau of Labor Statistics would not be able to identify the problem if it did not have access to the segregated data.

Similar practice of segregating and organizing statistical data is practised in the UK. According to the 2018 official data, the overall unemployment rate in the UK was 4% while the unemployment rate in the UK's black population stood at 9%. Remarkably, 43% of the UK's black population are employed in the public sector.⁷ In addition to the UK government's service that provides ethnicity facts and figures, the British Commons Library, which describes itself as “an impartial research and information service for MPs and their staff”, also prepares periodic research briefings on unemployment, providing a breakdown of employment data by ethnicity.⁸

The analysis of the statistical data published by two most Western and liberal countries allows to conclude that processing data by ethnicity does not serve as a means of segregating citizens and discriminating non-dominant ethnic groups. Rather, it serves the goal of exposing challenges specific to vulnerable groups and eliminating inequalities, which, in essence, complies with Georgia's understanding of the notion of inequality.

²For the purposes of this article, the word ethnicity is used in its wider sense and combines racial, cultural, language and religious belonging.

³<https://www.epi.org/publication/valerie-figures-state-unemployment-by-race/>

⁴<https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat18.htm>

⁵<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2020/10/23/492209/public-work-provides-economic-security-black-families-communities/>

⁶<https://read.dukeupress.edu/demography/article/54/1/391/167681/Public-Sector-Employment-Inequality-in-the-United>

⁷<https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/work-pay-and-benefits/employment/employment-by-sector/latest>

⁸<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06385/>

In this regard, it is interesting to look at a study conducted by the Institute for Development of Freedom and Information (IDFI) in 2013 on gender aspects of employment in the public sector. The study revealed essentially unequal practices of women's employment in the public sector⁹ and laid grounds for processing employment data by gender¹⁰ and starting debates about the need for a change in the current situation.

Despite the absence of detailed and disaggregated data, employment of non-dominant ethnic groups is still viewed as one of the most topical issues. In a study conducted by the Centre for Civil Integration and Inter-Ethnic Relations (CCIIR) in 2017, beneficiaries of the 1+4 programme viewed employment of ethnic minorities as one of the most significant challenges. Critically important was also the finding that more than a half (50.8%) of ethnic minority representatives described "a biased /negative attitude of the employer towards ethnic minorities" as one of the major barriers while 54% of the interviewed said affirmative policies should be in place in the job market for non-dominant ethnic groups.¹¹

Although the Georgian Statistics Office does not process unemployment data by ethnicity, it does provide unemployment data by region for 2019 on its official website. The data show that unemployment in Kvemo Kartli is second highest after Tbilisi: it stands at 14.6%, which is 3% higher than the average figure (11.6%) for the whole country. Against this background, it is interesting to look at the ethnic distribution of employment in the public sector in Kvemo Kartli. In 2016, the non-governmental organization Green Caucasus studied employment by ethnicity in the public sector in Kvemo Kartli. The study demonstrated that non-dominant ethnic groups made up only 17% of civil servants in the region, whereas in terms of population composition they make up 49% of the region's population. The highest imbalance between population and public sector employee numbers has been revealed in the Marneuli and Bolnisi municipalities. The study revealed the highest imbalance of 58% in Bolnisi between the ratio of ethnic groups in the population (69%) and their ratio in the Mayor's Administration (11%). In Marneuli, the figure is 54%.¹² No such study has been conducted at the national authorities level, but a simple observation suffices to presume that diversity inclusion is not the Georgian public sector's forte.

To sum up, it can be argued that the absence of detailed processed data does not eliminate the problem by itself. Public agencies and the Statistics Office may say they do not process detailed data out of liberal considerations, but it is obvious for all, especially for ethnic minorities, that there is systemic discrimination and structural marginalization in the public sector. Fragmented interventions by the state, such as 1+4 internship programmes, are not sufficient. Tackling this problem is hardly possible without gathering and processing significant primary data.

⁹ <https://idfi.ge/ge/statistics-of-public-servants-in-the-public-authorities-of-georgia-in-terms-of-gender>

¹⁰ http://www.csb.gov.ge/media/2762/report_2019-statistics.pdf

¹¹ https://cciir.ge/images/pdf/CCIIR%20research%20report_2017.pdf

¹² <http://www.ivote.ge/GREENCAUCASUS/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Minorities-in-Kvemo-Kartli-Municipal-Administrations-research-presentation-16092016.pdf>