

## Indigenous Peoples and the Georgian Reality

### Introduction

In recent times, the implementation of energy projects planned in Georgia, primarily in the country's mountainous regions, has been met with persistent protests from the local population. They particularly revolved around the construction of large hydropower plants, which sometimes resulted in favourable outcomes for the opponents; however, this has not finally removed the issue of the implementation of some energy projects from the agenda. The construction of large hydropower plants in Georgia has both supporters and opponents, each presenting arguments regarding the positive and negative consequences of their construction in specific regions.

Supporters primarily argue that the construction of these plants will provide energy security and independence for Georgia, not to mention the potential for improving the existing infrastructure for the local population. On the other hand, opponents foresee an ecological and demographic catastrophe, which raises doubts about the future existence of certain regions of Georgia. However, both parties acknowledge that the construction of energy facilities is essential for the country's economic development. While it is not within our competence to analyze these issues, it is worth mentioning that one group of humanitarian scientists has directly linked themselves to the situation with Nenskra Hydropower Project, specifically in connection with the dispute about "indigenous peoples".

The Nenskra Hydropower Project with plans to construct a large dam with a height of 125 m and an installed capacity of 280 MW in the upper reaches of the Nenskra and Nakra valleys in Georgia,<sup>1</sup> was first announced in 2012. In 2015, the official announcement of the Nenskra HPP construction was made,<sup>2</sup> with a target completion date of 2021. The project was undertaken by the Georgian Partnership Fund (15%) and the Korean State Water Company K Water (75%), with support from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) (10%).<sup>3</sup> Preparatory work commenced shortly thereafter, triggering protests from opponents of the project. Since then, protests

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<sup>1</sup> *Nenskra HPP Compliance Review Report*, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> ნენსკრაჰესის მშენებლობა იწყება (YouTube video).

<sup>3</sup> The EBRD will provide a loan of up to USD 214 million and a portable equity investment of up to USD 15 million. EBRD and ADB (Asian Development Bank) are the main organizers of the financing group.

against the construction of the Nenskra HPP and other power plants in Svaneti have become persistent and diverse in form. Rallies were organized, and written complaints were submitted. In 2016 and 2018, a Svan council meeting known as the Lalkhor was organized. In 2018, at the Lalkhor, representatives of almost all the communities of Svaneti unanimously resolved to prohibit the construction of hydroelectric power plants, gold mining, and any other activities deemed harmful, destructive to nature, and detrimental to the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of human habitation throughout Svaneti.

The Lalkhor declaration called upon the President, Prime Minister, Parliament, and international organizations in Georgia to recognize the Svans as the indigenous population (ადგილობრივი მოსახლეობა). Such recognition would grant them the opportunity to legalize traditional and communal property rights. Based on international law, no infrastructure project in Svaneti could be implemented without their agreement.<sup>1</sup>

In 2019, a protest rally organized by “Green Alternative” took place in Luxembourg, calling for the suspension of the Nenskra dam construction. This initiative garnered support from about 96,000 EU citizens. Additionally, the #StopNenskra petition, signed by people across Europe, was submitted to international banks. The petition appealed to the presidents of the EBRD and the European Investment Bank (EIB), urging them not to sign the loan contract for the planned construction of a large hydroelectric plant in Georgia. The petition argued that the project posed a threat to the country’s biodiversity, it failed to comply with legislation and violated human rights.<sup>2</sup>

In 2018, concerning the Nenskra Hydro project, representatives from the Chuberi community in Svaneti, along with non-governmental organizations “Green Alternative” and the CEE Bankwatch Network, appealed to the Project Complaint Mechanism (PCM) of the project’s financiers, the EBRD and EIB, to investigate the case. The complaint alleged that the banks had failed to adhere to the 2014 Environmental and Social Policy (2014 ESP) in relation to the ESP Performance Requirements (PRs); the complaining party outlined five points that they believed to be non-compliant. One of them concerned the absence of categorization of the Project-affected Svan community as Indigenous Peoples<sup>3</sup> (indigenous population in Georgian documents).

As a result, Compliance Review Report published in 2020, identified the Bank’s non-compliance in relation to: the rights of Indigenous Peoples; the Assessment and Management of Environmental and Social Impacts and Issues (with respect to cumulative impacts, Project alternatives and gender); Land Acquisition, Involuntary

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<sup>1</sup> *Status of Indigenous Peoples – the Svans’ Struggle for Habitat.*

<sup>2</sup> Kochladze, *The never-ending saga of the Nenskra HPP.*

<sup>3</sup> *Nenskra HPP Compliance Review Report*, p. 5.

Resettlement and Economic Displacement; Cultural Heritage; and Information Disclosure and Stakeholder Engagement.<sup>1</sup> Due to the efforts of the opponents of the Nenskra HPP construction, the project's implementation was halted.

### **Terminology confusion**

As previously mentioned, one of the key demands stated in the 2018 Lalkhori petition was the recognition of the Svans as the indigenous population of Svaneti. At first glance, this demand may appear ordinary and justifiable to someone unfamiliar with the matter, as the Svans are indeed the indigenous inhabitants of Svaneti, one of Georgia's historical-ethnographic regions. The petition expresses this point as follows:

*“We affirm the authentic and historic truth that Svans are descendants of ancient Georgian ancestry and one of the primary indigenous tribes of the Georgian nation. For over 55 centuries, Svaneti and the Svans have faithfully and honourably followed the history of Georgia. Svaneti and the Svans have always been an integral and constituent part of Georgia and the Georgian nation. Therefore, we wholeheartedly support the social, economic, and cultural development of Svaneti, as well as the advancement of specific areas of the economy. We declare that as Svans, we represent an ancient, indigenous, aboriginal, and autochthonous people (population in the Georgian text \_ N. J.) with a fundamental claim and legitimate authority over the territory of Svaneti!*

*Based on the aforementioned, we demand that the Government of Georgia, the United Nations, and international organizations recognize the Svans as indigenous people (indigenous population in the Georgian text – N. J.). Consequently, we call for the legal recognition of our customary and community tenure rights. Furthermore, in accordance with international law, we insist that no infrastructure projects be approved without our prior consent...”<sup>2</sup>*

Within the context of the Nenskrahydro project, the correspondence between indigenous peoples and the Svans has become a matter of manipulation and extensive discussion among scientific experts. However, there is some confusion due to the terminology used. In Georgian, the term “indigenous” is a synonym for “native”, “aboriginal”, or “local”. The confusion arises from the fact that the term indigenous population (მკვიდრი მოსახლეობა) is used as an equivalent to the term indigenous peoples (მკვიდრი ხალხები) in the Georgian translations of the official documents of relevant international organizations, and consequently

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Varadashvili, *Gathering of Svaneti communities*.

in official Georgian documents. Hence, this term has also become established within the Georgian vocabulary. It is important to note that the *indigenous peoples* and *indigenous population* represent different categories. In reality, the case concerns *indigenous peoples* – a socio-political concept that denotes a definite social group with specific characteristics.

We do not have a universal definition of *indigenous peoples*, but this group is recognized by the United Nations based on the following criteria: Indigenous peoples have in common a historical continuity with a given region before colonization and a strong link to their lands. They maintain, at least in part, distinct social, economic and political systems. They have distinct languages, cultures, beliefs and knowledge systems.<sup>1</sup> In other words, this category unites the primary inhabitants of specific regions who are different from the groups that later settled in the area. Indigenous peoples have preserved their traditions or other aspects of early culture. In the state where they live, they stand apart politically and culturally from the ethnic majority and distinguish themselves from them. Today indigenous peoples represent a non-dominant part of society, a people that must preserve, develop and pass on to future generations their ancestral territories, and ethnic identity as the basis of their continued existence.

Following the position of J. Kymlicka, “Indigenous peoples do not just constitute different cultures, but they form entirely distinct forms of culture, distinct ‘civilizations’, rooted in a premodern way of life that needs protecting from the forces of modernization, secularization, urbanization, ‘Westernisation’, etc.”<sup>2</sup>

The World Health Organization identifies Indigenous peoples as “communities that live within, or are attached to geographically distinct traditional habitats or ancestral territories, and who identify themselves as being part of a distinct cultural group, descended from groups present in the area before modern states were created and current borders defined. They generally maintain cultural and social identities, and social, economic, cultural and political institutions, separate from the mainstream or dominant society or culture”<sup>3</sup>.

As noted by J. Beckett, “Indigenous peoples are the original inhabitants of lands that were subsequently occupied by newcomers, in relation to whom they remain to some degree culturally different, and politically and economically inferior”<sup>4</sup>.

According to the definition by the World Bank, “Indigenous peoples can be identified in particular geographical areas by the presence in varying degrees of the following characteristics:

<sup>1</sup> *Reporter’s Indigenous Terminology Guide*.

<sup>2</sup> Kymlicka, *Politics in the Vernacular*, pp.128-129.

<sup>3</sup> *Indigenous populations*.

<sup>4</sup> Beckett, *Indigeneity*, pp. 755–761.

- (a) a close attachment to ancestral territories and the natural resources in these areas;
- (b) self-identification and identification by others as members of a distinct cultural group;
- (c) an indigenous language, often different from the national language;
- (d) presence of customary social and political institutions;
- (e) primarily subsistence-oriented production.”<sup>1</sup>

It should be noted that in the definitions of indigenous peoples adopted by international organizations (United Nations, International Labor Organization, World Bank, EBRD, ADB, etc.), this category of the world population is referred to as an ethnic group. In the national constitutions, statutes, and relevant laws of many countries that borrow from the Bank, specific provisions and legal frameworks exist to identify indigenous peoples. However, it should be noted that Georgian legislation does not recognize such a group,<sup>2</sup> as there is no ethnic group residing within the territorial boundaries of Georgia that meets the criteria for recognition as indigenous peoples.

As mentioned above, indigenous peoples are translated from English into Georgian as indigenous population and vice versa, the indigenous population as indigenous peoples from Georgian into English. However, the Georgian მკვიდრი მოსახლეობა (indigenous population) inherently does not correspond to indigenous peoples, since it does not have a socio-political connotation; It can be better defined as an attribute-subject pair. It is not clear to us why the concept of indigenous peoples was replaced by the term indigenous population, is it to blame for this bad translation or a conscious attempt to confuse the object? What is clear is that this discrepancy has really confused a part of society, and one should not be surprised if the average Georgian (esp. Svans) does not understand why Svans are not given the status of “indigenous population” when in fact they are such.

As one of the respondents noted in a conversation with us, “People from some organization come in Svaneti and fill out questionnaires. The Svans are asked: are you indigenous? Of course, we are indigenous, they respond. Afterwards, the Svans sign and demand recognition” (Female respondent from Svaneti).

Based on the foregoing, the statement, in the Lalthor petition: “*The Svans, represent ancient, indigenous, aboriginal, autochthonic population*” – is absolutely right. However, the English language version of this petition, with indigenous people standing instead, i. e.: “The Svans represent the *ancient, indigenous, aboriginal, autochthonic people*” and, therefore, the request of Svans to be recognized as indigenous people, is essentially inappropriate.

<sup>1</sup> *The World Bank Operational Manual.*

<sup>2</sup> *Nenskrahydro and the status of indigenous population, p. 1.*

The request made by the Lalkhor may seem absurd, because if based on their own statement: “*Svans are descendants of ancient Georgian ancestry and one of the primary indigenous tribes of the Georgian nation. For over 55 centuries, Svaneti and the Svans have faithfully and honourably followed the history of Georgia. Svaneti and the Svans have always been an integral and constituent part of Georgia and the Georgian nation*”, then on what basis they are demanding the status of indigenous peoples?

The question arises: what are the interests of those who oppose the construction of the hydropower plant and advocate for granting indigenous peoples’ status to the Svans? It is important to note, that both the United Nations and major financial organizations have their own policies and guidelines concerning indigenous peoples. These policies aim to address the specific rights, needs, and cultural heritage of indigenous communities worldwide. It is possible that those who support the recognition of the Svans as indigenous people are seeking to align with these policies to advocate for their rights and secure certain protections or benefits.

According to the World Bank policy regarding this category of the world’s population, “they need the protection of the laws as they are gullible and fall prey to the tactics of unscrupulous people and are susceptible to exploitation on account of their innocence, poverty and backwardness extending over centuries”.<sup>1</sup>

In 2007, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was subsequently reflected in the policy documents of the above-mentioned and other similar organizations.

The 46-point declaration describes the rights granted to this category of groups under international law. In particular, indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination, on the basis of which they freely determine their political status and freely engage in their economic, social and cultural development; enjoy the right of self-determination, they have autonomy or independence in matters concerning their internal and local activities, as well as ways and means of financing their autonomous functions; Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions while retaining the right to participate fully in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the State as they wish. Indigenous peoples have the right to create their media in their own languages, and to establish and control mother tongue educational systems and institutions appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. Indigenous peoples have the right to own, use, develop and control the lands, territories and resources that belong to them by virtue of traditional ownership or other traditional activities or uses, as well as those they have acquired through other means. States shall ensure the legal recognition of

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<sup>1</sup> *Indigenous Peoples Policy Framework*, p. 17.

these lands, territories and resources and protection. Such recognition should be done with due respect for the customs, traditions and land tenure systems of the respective indigenous peoples, etc.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, international law has granted several rights to Indigenous peoples; if the Svans receive the status of an independent entity, then they will enjoy all the rights of this social group: firstly, they will have the opportunity to manage the resources they have. It turns out that, being recognized as Indigenous People, the Svans will solve problematic issues in their favour and will be able to pursue their own policy, which in a particular case means stopping the construction of a hydroelectric power plant, and indeed, any activity that will threaten their identity.

The request to grant the status of Indigenous peoples to the Svans has generated differing opinions within society. Some individuals argue that such a demand could be seen as separatism or as a rejection or diminishment of their Georgian identity. On the other hand, some view it as a means for the Svans to protect their unique customs, traditions, way of life, language, and identity within their homeland, what the state has not found the proper place for in the model of modern economic development.<sup>2</sup>

The question of whether granting indigenous peoples' status to the Svans is fair and scientifically justified is a separate issue that will be addressed below. However, it is important to note that categorizing the Svans as Indigenous People opens up the possibility of new external threats to the state. There may be third parties with their own geopolitical interests towards the country, specifically targeting border regions.

### **Svans and the Status of *Indigenous Peoples***

In the geographically diverse territory of Georgia, almost all climate zones of the world are represented, ranging from humid subtropical to zones of eternal snow and glaciers. The physical-geographical and climatic heterogeneity of Georgia has contributed to the formation of distinct ethnographic provinces. The different natural environments have influenced the development of regional cultural traits, evident in settlement patterns, housing types, clothing, food, economic activities, burial practices, religious beliefs, and other socio-cultural traditions. Over the centuries, various agricultural branches and diverse agricultural traditions have emerged, aligning with the specific characteristics of the country's lowland, foothill, and mountain agricultural zones.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.*

<sup>2</sup> *The status of the indigenous population.*

<sup>3</sup> Burduli (et al.), *Traditional agriculture*, p. 3.

In the highlands, where unfavourable conditions for agriculture prevail (Khevsureti, Khevi, Mtiuleti, Gudamakari, Svaneti, Tusheti, etc.), cattle breeding has become more prominent. Conversely, on the plains (Kartli, Kakheti, Imereti, etc.), agriculture has emerged as the predominant economic activity. Terraced agriculture is typical in South Georgia, particularly in Samtskhe-Javakheti, due to the region's relief and natural conditions. The architectural styles found in different parts of Georgia are closely aligned with the physical-geographical environment, considering factors such as border location, limited land area, and the risk of avalanches and landslides. Traditionally, tower culture is prevalent in the mountainous provinces (Svaneti, Khevsureti, Tusheti, Khevi), while in the lowlands of eastern Georgia and on the southeastern plateau, houses with "swallow dome"-type roofs and dugouts with rammed roofs can be found. In western Georgia, other architectural styles such as Oda houses and Patskha are observed, etc.

The Svans, as one of the ethnographic groups of Georgians, introduced specific and original cultural features into the general culture of Georgia; they were shaped by the physical, geographical, and climatic characteristics of their settlement territory. The existence of Svan invariants of common Georgian culture in no way became a condition for the formation of the Svans as a separate and independent people. Actually, the distinctive local cultural traits of the Svans diversified and enriched the overall Georgian culture. However, for a particular segment of our society, their recognition as *Indigenous Peoples* serves as a means of counteracting the implementation of some energy projects in Svaneti.

The existence of the Svan language served as one of the pretexts for the opponents demanding to grant the status of *Indigenous Peoples* to the Svans. Since, as mentioned earlier, the presence of a distinct family language, separate from the formal language, is considered a significant criterion by international organizations when recognizing a group as *Indigenous People*.

Linguists have not yet reached a definitive conclusion regarding whether Svan is a dialect of Georgian or one of the related languages that emerged from proto-Kartvelian. According to some experts, the Svan language, together with Megrelian, Laz and Georgian, belongs to the South Caucasian language group. Among them, Georgian is the literary language, while the others are unwritten. From a linguistic perspective, they are separate languages, although functionally they hold a similar status as dialects of the Georgian language. Over time, each linguistic unit (Svan, Megrelian, and Laz) has diverged from the base language to such an extent that it has become an independent language. However, for the Svans, Megrelians, and Laz, as well as for the rest of the Georgians, the common national, literary, and official language has always been and will continue to be the Georgian language with its ancient script and rich literary traditions.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Margiani, *Grammar of the Svan language*, p. 1.



Alternatively, according to another viewpoint presented by T. Putkaradze, T. Gvantseladze, M. Tabidze, and others, Megrelian-Chan, Svan, and Laz are considered dialects. T. Putkaradze argues that the qualification of Megrelian, Svan, and Laz as separate languages was established during the Soviet period without any criteria. Megrelians, Svans and Laz, along with Georgians from other regions, are recognized as the creators of one of the oldest bookish cultures in the world, namely the Georgian literary language. An ethnos/nation has a language, and a part of an ethnos/nation has a dialect.<sup>1</sup>

According to B. Jorbenadze, “From a linguistic point of view, Megrelian-Chan and Svan are related languages to Georgian, but from an ethnopolitical point of view, they have the same status as dialects ”.<sup>2</sup>

Researchers note that the state status of the Georgian language was recognized in all principalities without exception, and at the same time it was a marker of Georgian identity. Linguists consider Georgian linguistic diversity to be the unique cornerstone of the intangible heritage of historical and modern Georgia, which is strewn with the distinctive speech codes and dialects of Georgians. “Georgian, the state language of our country, Kolkhuri (the same Megrelian-Laz) and Svan, the three Georgian language subsystems that have survived, encompass the entirety of Georgia, both historically and in the present. From the archaic period, the Georgian language was the official language of all Georgian provinces (including Abkhazia, Samegrelo, Svaneti, and Lazeti). Both pagan and Christian services were performed in the Georgian language which also served as the language of politics, culture, education, and art within the state. The Georgian language had a pervasive presence throughout the country, functioning in every sphere and domain. Over time, due to its extensive usage, the Georgian language developed various subsystems and numerous dialects...”<sup>3</sup>.

The same authors claim that Svan is one of the most prominent and significant linguistic representatives of the Kartvelian language family. The archaic features present in the Svan language hold immense value for the historical and comparative study of Georgian languages and the reconstruction of linguistic archetypes, since structurally, Svan is closely related to the common Georgian base language; its complex phonetic system, grammatical features, and dialectal variations are particularly valuable from a broader linguistic perspective.<sup>4</sup>

The Svans have always remained connected to the wider Georgian reality and national roots. They are heirs and contributors to Georgian literature, just like representatives from other ethnographic provinces. The Svan language was primarily

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<sup>1</sup> Putkaradze, *The National Language*, pp. 26-63.

<sup>2</sup> Jorbenadze, *Georgian dialectology*, p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> Chukhua (et al.), *Caucasian peoples*, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

used for colloquial speech, while written and formal communication utilized the Georgian language, naturally serving as the language of the Church and official affairs.<sup>1</sup>

According to R. Topchishvili, “The Svans have contributed to the creation of a unified Georgian culture, just like representatives from other ethnographic provinces of Georgia. Although Svaneti residents spoke Svan, one of the Georgian languages, within their families, all surviving historical documents from Svaneti are written in Georgian. Historically, all Svans possessed knowledge of the Georgian language alongside Svan. This was necessary due to their Christian faith, as theological books were only available in the Georgian language. They have always considered themselves part of the broader Georgian nation... In this regard, an inscription on the ‘Svan Icon’ from the 11<sup>th</sup> century is indicative and expresses the sense of all-Georgian unity: ‘Glory to the Bagration kings’. This inscription, along with another document created within Svaneti itself, which contains a prayer for the strength and prosperity of ‘United Georgia’, upholds an established tradition. For the Megrelians, as well as for the Svans and Abkhazians, the official, literary, and theological language has always been the Georgian language”.<sup>2</sup>

As early as the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Besarion Nizharadze wrote: “*The Svan language is indeed the Georgian language, only it has been changed here and there, but some people cannot reconcile with this opinion and shout, the Svans are completely different people! I would like to know for whom or for what this insistence and alienation of the Svans are necessary [...] In Svaneti, they glorified God in the Georgian language since ancient times, and it is still the same today. What foreign language could protect Christianity in this lost country, if not Georgian, which the Svans consider their mother tongue?!*”<sup>3</sup>

It is important to highlight that the manipulation of the Svan factor, including the Svan language, originated during the period of Tsarist Russia, which actively sought to undermine Svaneti as a pillar of the Georgian state. T. Putkaradze emphasizes that “in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Caucasian passes in Svaneti held great significance for Russia. Therefore, the empire not only attempted to physically subjugate the local Georgians but also to lure them away and degenerate their consciousness. The empire’s emissaries, disguised as clergy, preached that Svans were not Georgians and that their mother tongue was not Georgian but Svan. They even started translating the Gospels into one of the Svan dialects. However, the Georgian people, who had endured numerous hardships, easily recognized the treachery of the conqueror: the enemy tried to deprive the Svans of their centuries-old literary native language, their historical culture, and

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Topchishvili, *Historical-Ethnographic Regions*, p. 228.

<sup>3</sup> Nizharadze, *In what language the Svans glorified and glorify God*.

their statehood. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, they created an alphabet and translated the Gospel for them as if they were savages”.

T. Putkaradze further emphasizes that this issue remains relevant today, as “there are still attempts to separate the Svans from other Georgians. Those who seek to divide Georgians linguistically and ethnically continue their efforts, attempting to translate Holy Scripture into Georgian dialects and by declaring these dialects as literary languages, deprive the Svans, Laz and Magrelians of the bookish past, and thereby dismember our people. In Georgian media and certain dubious scientific works, inappropriate terms such as “Svans with a non-bookish language”, “Svan nationality”, “Svan culture”, and “Svan ethnicity” are deliberately used.<sup>1</sup>

According to anthropologists, the Svans clearly belong to the groups of the Caucasian morphological type on the anthropological map of the Caucasus. The morphological and genetic characteristics of the Svans testify to their Georgian origin. Their distinctive anthropological features are scattered among the modern population of Georgia in varying degrees and proportions, indicating the existence of an ancient common basis; the Svans are the same Georgians as representatives of the other historical-ethnographic regions of Georgia.<sup>2</sup>

Historical sources and archaeological evidence support the notion that Svaneti served as a crucial trade route leading to the North Caucasus and the Black Sea in ancient times and the early Middle Ages. The Kodori Gorge provided a convenient passage to the Black Sea coast, where a trading post was established during Greek colonization. From there, a sea route connected Svaneti to Central Europe, Byzantium, and the northern coast of the Black Sea. This trade route held significant trade and military potential, leading to conflicts between the Persian and Byzantine states for control over the region until the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

Numismatic evidence also highlights the importance of the highlanders living in Svaneti and the Inguri region. The presence of local and foreign coins indicates their continuous contact with the plains of the country and the wider world.<sup>4</sup> Coinage, being a document of state importance, signifies the basis of a country’s statehood and serves as a primary historical source for its political, economic, and cultural history. The discovery of local and foreign coins in Svaneti provides credible proof that the region actively participated in the general monetary circulation of the country. The chronology of numismatic collections in Svaneti dates back to the “Kolkhuri Tetri”, minted in the

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<sup>1</sup> Putkaradze, *The Svans, residence, mother tongue, dialect*, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> Bitadze (et al.), *Svans on the anthropological map of the Caucasus*, pp. 31-33.

<sup>3</sup> Gasviani, *From the history of Western Georgian Highlands*; Atanelishvili, *The issue of Svaneti in the diplomatic relations*.

<sup>4</sup> Pataridze, *Numismatic Treasures of Svaneti*, pp. 162-167.

second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, which is proof that this historical-ethnographic area was involved in the country's monetary-commodity relationship from that time.

In addition to numismatic evidence, the presence of ancient glyptic artefacts in Svaneti further confirms the region's active participation in Georgia's foreign political life, particularly in its relations with the Roman world.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of "people" is examined from both political and ethnocultural perspectives in scientific literature. From a political standpoint, the term "people" is synonymous with "nation". Therefore, the Georgian people and the Georgian nation are one and the same, with the Svans being an integral part of the Georgian people, nation, and culture, rather than a separate people.

According to experts in international law, belonging to a people or nation implies the existence of historical, cultural, and practical ties, further affirming the status of the Svans as an integral part of the Georgian nation. From a cultural-historical and ethnographic perspective, as well as in terms of self-awareness, the Svans have Georgian ethnic identity. This is evident when individuals from any region are asked about their nationality outside the borders of Georgia; they will undoubtedly answer that they are Georgians. Only when the question is posed within Georgia might they specify their regional origin, such as Samegrelo, Kakheti, Svaneti, and so on.

## **Conclusion**

Finally, it can be said that there are two distinct positions within Georgian society regarding the construction of large hydroelectric power plants. Proponents, including the government, view these projects as crucial for energy independence and security. However, a segment of society is concerned about the potential ecological, demographic, and ethnocultural impacts of such projects, particularly Nenskra HPP. They seek valid arguments to halt the construction and consider granting the status of *Indigenous Peoples* to the Svans as a possible solution. By attaining this status, the Svans would gain special rights recognized by the United Nations, enabling them to independently pursue their own politics and reject activities they deem undesirable in their territory.

However, it has been argued by scientists that granting the status of *Indigenous Peoples* to the Svans lacks a logical basis. Aside from their distinct language, the Svans share similar socio-cultural characteristics with inhabitants of other ethnographic regions in Georgia. Svans are the same Georgian as Mingrelians, Kartlians, Khevsurs, Imertians, Rachvels and representatives of other ethnographic provinces.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

We believe that it would be appropriate to establish the term ინდიგენი ხალხ(ებ)ი and not the *indigenous population* (მკვიდრი მოსახლეობა) in the Georgian vocabulary to match Indigenous People(s). Accordingly, in the relevant Georgian documents, მკვიდრი მოსახლეობა (indigenous population) should be replaced by ინდიგენი ხალხ(ებ)ი, which fundamentally excludes the possibility of manipulating the terms and will not allow groups with different political, financial and personal interests to mislead the public.

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**Natia Jalabadze**

## **Indigenous Peoples and the Georgian Reality**

### Summary

The article explores the challenges associated with the development of energy projects in Georgia, specifically focusing on the construction of the Nenskra HPP in Svaneti. This project has brought to the forefront the issue of recognizing the Svans as Indigenous People.

Recently there has been growing opposition to energy projects in the country, with part of society expressing concerns about the potential ecological, demographic, and ethnocultural impact of large-scale hydropower plants in the region. These opponents have resorted to persistent protests to express their dissent. Some of them view granting indigenous status to the Svans as a potential solution and a mechanism to impede ongoing processes.

In 2018, a Svan council meeting – Lalkhor was held in Svaneti which resulted in a unanimous decision to prohibit the construction of HPP, gold mining, and any other activities deemed harmful, destructive to nature, and detrimental to the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of human habitation throughout Svaneti. The Lalkhor also demanded official recognition of the Svans as Indigenous People.

Indigenous Peoples is a social group consisting of the original inhabitants of a particular region, distinct from the groups that settled later. They have preserved their traditions and other notions of their early culture. Indigenous Peoples stand apart politically and culturally from the ethnic majority of their state. Today, indigenous peoples represent a non-dominant segment of society.

Indigenous Peoples are granted special rights by the United Nations. Thus, recognizing the Svans as Indigenous People would provide them with an opportunity to legalize their traditional and communal property. According to international legislation, no infrastructure project could be implemented in Svaneti without their agreement, granting them the freedom to pursue their own policies and control activities they do not wish to have on their territory. This right allows them to refuse and suspend such projects.

Within the context of the Nenskrahydro project, the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and the Svans has become subject to manipulation. The confusion arises from the Georgian translation of the term “indigenous peoples”, which is rendered as “indigenous population” in the relevant organizational documents in Georgian. “Indigenous peoples” and “indigenous population” represent distinct categories. “Indigenous peoples” is a socio-political term, while “indigenous population”, used as a substitute for “indigenous peoples”, does not accurately convey the same meaning and is not a socio-political term. It remains unclear whether this discrepancy is a result of poor translation or a deliberate attempt to create confusion regarding the subject matter.

Categorizing the Svans as Indigenous People opens up the possibility of creating new external threats to our state. This problem involves a third party with its own geopolitical interests towards our country, with a specific focus on capturing border regions.

Scientific evidence supports the notion that granting indigenous status to the Svans lacks a logical foundation. Aside from their distinct language, the Svans do not differ significantly from the inhabitants of other regions in Georgia who possess specific local socio-cultural characteristics, similar to the Svans.

We propose the adoption of the term “indigenous people(s)” in the Georgian vocabulary, replacing “indigenous population”. This change would align with the concept of Indigenous People(s) and prevent the manipulation of these terms. Additionally, it would safeguard against misleading the public by groups with diverse political, financial, and personal interests.



## მკვიდრი ხალხები და ქართული სინამდვილე

რეზიუმე

სტატიაში განხილულია საქართველოში დაგეგმილი ენერგოპროექტების, კონკრეტულად კი სვანეთში ნენსკრის ჰიდროელექტროსადგურის მშენებლობასთან დაკავშირებული გამოწვევები, რამაც საზოგადოების წინაშე სვანების მკვიდრ ხალხად აღიარების პრობლემა დააყენა.

ბოლო პერიოდში ქვეყანაში ენერგოპროექტების განხორციელებას მრავალი მონინალმდევე გამოუჩნდა; საზოგადოების ნაწილი თვლის, რომ დიდი ჰესები რეგიონის ეკოლოგიურ, დემოგრაფიულ და ეთნოკულტურულ ინფრასტრუქტურას დააზიანებს. ისინი ცდილობენ თავიანთი პროტესტი პერმანენტული აქციებით გამოხატონ. ოპონენტებს ერთ-ერთ გამოსავლად და მიმდინარე პროცესების დამაბრკოლებელ მექანიზმად სვანებისთვის მკვიდრი ხალხების სტატუსის მინიჭება მიაჩნიათ.

2018 წელს გაიმართა სრულიად სვანეთის კრება ლალხორი, რომელმაც ერთხმად მიიღო გადაწყვეტილება, მთელ სვანეთში ჰესების მშენებლობის, ოქროს წარმოებისა და ყველა, ბუნებისთვის, ადამიანის საცხოვრისის, მატერიალური და არამატერიალური კულტურული მემკვიდრეობისათვის მავნებელ, საზიანო და დამანგრეველი სამუშაოების ჩატარების აკრძალვის შესახებ. ლალხორმა მოითხოვა სვანების მკვიდრ ხალხად აღიარება.

მკვიდრი ხალხები სოციალური ჯგუფია; ის აერთიანებს კონკრეტული რეგიონის თავდაპირველ მცხოვრებთ, რომლებიც განსხვავდებიან ამ ტერიტორიაზე მოგვიანებით დასახლებული ჯგუფებისგან. მკვიდრ ხალხებს შენარჩუნებული აქვთ თავიანთი ტრადიციები ან ადრეული კულტურის სხვადასხვა ნიშნები. სახელმწიფოში, სადაც ცხოვრობენ, ისინი პოლიტიკურად და კულტურულად ცალკე დგანან ეთნიკური უმრავლესობისაგან და თავიანთ თავს მათგან განასხვავებენ; დღეს მკვიდრი ხალხები წარმოადგენენ საზოგადოების არადომინანტურ ნაწილს.

მკვიდრი ხალხები სარგებლობენ გაერთიანებული ერების ორგანიზაციისაგან მინიჭებული განსაკუთრებული უფლებებით. ამდენად, სვანების მკვიდრ ხალხად აღიარება, მათ მისცემდა ტრადიციული და სათემო საკუთრების დაკანონების შესაძლებლობას, ხოლო საერთაშორისო კანონმდებლობიდან გამომდინარე, მათთან შეთანხმების გარეშე, სვანეთში არცერთი ინფრასტრუქტურული პროექტი აღარ განხორციელდებოდა, მათ ექნებოდათ

თავიანთი პოლიტიკის დამოუკიდებლად გაატარების და თავიანთ ტერიტორიაზე მიმდინარე მათთვის არასასურველ საქმიანობაზე უარის თქმის და მისი შეჩერების უფლება.

ნენსკრაპიდროს პერიპეტივებში სვანებისთვის მკვიდრი ხალხების (Indigenous People) სტატუსის მინიჭების საკითხი ერთგვარი მანიპულაციის ობიექტად იქცა. გაუგებრობას იწვევს თავად ტერმინის Indigenous Peoples (მკვიდრი ხალხები) ქართული შესატყვისი, რაც სათანადო ორგანიზაციების სამოქმედო დოკუმენტების ქართულენოვან ვერსიებში თარგმნილია, როგორც მკვიდრი მოსახლეობა (indigenous population). მკვიდრი ხალხები და მკვიდრი მოსახლეობა განსხვავებული კატეგორიის ცნებებია. მკვიდრი ხალხები (Indigenous People) სოციო-პოლიტიკური ტერმინია; მკვიდრი მოსახლეობა, რომელიც ინგლისურად local population-ად ითარგმნება და ქართულ ოფიციალურ დოკუმენტებში Indigenous Peoples-ის შესატყვისად იხმარება, ამ უკანასკნელს არსობრივად არ შეესაბამება და სოციო-პოლიტიკური ტერმინი არ არის; გაუგებარია, რატომ ჩანაცვლდა მკვიდრი ხალხების ცნება ტერმინ მკვიდრი მოსახლეობით, ეს უხარისხო თარგმანს უნდა დავებრალოთ თუ ობიექტის დაბნევის შეგნებულ მცდელობას?

სვანთა აღნიშნულ კატეგორიაში მოქცევა, ჩვენი სახელმწიფოსთვის ახალი საგარეო საფრთხეების წარმოქმნის პერსპექტივას აჩენს. ეს პრობლემა კი მესამე ძალაა, რომელსაც ჩვენი ქვეყნის მიმართ თავისი გეოპოლიტიკური ინტერესები გააჩნია და სასაზღვრო რეგიონების მიტაცებაზეა ორიენტირებული.

მეცნიერთა მიერ დამტკიცებულია, რომ სვანებისთვის მკვიდრი ხალხების სტატუსის მინიჭება ყოველგვარ ლოგიკურ საფუძველს მოკლებულია. საოჯახო ენის გარდა, სვანები არაფრით არ განსხვავდებიან საქართველოს სხვა კუთხეების მკვიდრთაგან, რომელთაც, მათ მსგავსად, სპეციფიკური ლოკალური სოციო-კულტურული მახასიათებლები გააჩნიათ. სვანი ისეთივე ქართველია, როგორც მეგრელი, ქართლელი, ხევსური, იმერელი, რაჭველი, და საქართველოს სხვა ეთნოგრაფიული კუთხის წარმომადგენელი.

მართებულად მიგვაჩნია, ქართულ ლექსიკაში Indigenous People(s)-ის შესატყვისად დამკვიდრდეს ტერმინი – ინდიგენი ხალხ(ებ)ი და არა მკვიდრი მოსახლეობა და შესაბამის ქართულ დოკუმენტებში მკვიდრი მოსახლეობა ინდიგენი ხალხ(ებ)ით ჩანაცვლდეს, რაც საფუძველშივე გამორიცხავს ტერმინებით მანიპულირების შესაძლებლობას და სხვადასხვა პოლიტიკური, ფინანსური და პირადი ინტერესებით მოქმედ ჯგუფებს არ მისცემს საზოგადოების შეცდომაში შეყვანის საშუალებას.