

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF ARMENIA

Muslim Communities of Georgia:
External Influences and Domestic Challenges

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Introduction

The current dynamics of Muslim communities of Georgia needs investigation given the visible growth of mosques, Muslim organizations and madrassas in Georgia. Georgia's cooperation with Turkey, Azerbaijan and Iran encompasses wide range of fields including activities in the educational and religious domains. The lack of civic harmony in the country, protests and discontent among Christian and Muslim population hinders the unity of the country. Shortcomings in the reforms and policies addressing the issues of Muslim minorities impedes their integration into social and political life of Georgia.

The current Master's Essay examines the Muslim community of Georgia, which is the largest religious minority of the country. The paper focuses on the situation in Ajaria, Kvemo Kartli regions and Tbilisi. The paper attempts to study the impact of external influences on the Muslim communities of Georgia, reviewing the activities of Turkey, Azerbaijan and Iran in the religious and educational fields of the country. Moreover, the paper addresses the challenges faced by Muslim communities of Georgia and the issues of concern among non-Muslim population.

The paper starts with the brief historical background of Islam in Georgia. The first chapter of the paper overviews the literature devoted to the study of Muslim communities of Georgia. The second chapter of the paper discusses separately the activities of Turkey, Azerbaijan and Iran. The first sub-chapter reviews the activities of Turkey, primarily in the Ajaria region, discussing the issues of concern among both Muslim and non-Muslim population. The second sub-chapter discusses the activities of Azerbaijan in the Kvemo Kartli region,

populated mainly by Azerbaijanis and their essential problems. The third sub-chapter examines the activities of Iran primarily focused on Azerbaijani population of Georgia.

The paper attempts to test the following hypothesis:

H1: Domestic challenges have an impact on increase of external influences over Muslim communities of Georgia

H0: Domestic challenges does not have an impact on increase of external influences over Muslim communities of Georgia

The research questions aiming to test the hypothesis are the following:

RQ1: What are the main defining features of the increase of external influences?

RQ2: Which countries pursue religious policies in Georgia?

RQ3: To what extent are the Muslim communities of Georgia integrated into Georgian social and political life?

Islam in Georgia: Background

Georgia is among one of the first states adopting Christianity as its official religion in 337. Georgia preserved Christianity as its official religion in spite of the fact that it was under the rule of Muslims and was occupied by Muslim conquerors several times. Thus, Christianity plays an important role in the Georgian identity and in the history of Georgia as a whole. Nonetheless, Georgia has long had a population of Muslims. Nowadays Muslims constitute the largest religious minority in Georgia (Caucasus Research Resource Centers 2008; Sanikidze and Walker 2004; Menagarishvili et al. 2013).

The introduction of Islam in Georgia took place during the Middle Ages as a result of contact between Georgia and Islamic world. In the 8-th century the Arabs conquered Tbilisi and dominated Georgia until 12-th century. From then on, Georgia had always had a population of Muslims, even after reconquering Tbilisi by the King David the Builder in 1122. In the 16-th and 17-th centuries the dynasty of Safavid Shiites of Persian and Ottoman Sunni Sultans took control over the South Caucasian region aiming to dominate across the entire Caucasian region (Balci and Motika 2007). The population of Tbilisi preserved its religious attainment even in the period of 16-th and 17-th centuries, when the spread of Islam into rural areas marked its beginning and much of the city was controlled by the Ottoman Turks and Iranian Safavids (Sanikidze and Walker 2004; Sipurashvili 2014).

The Islamization of the Ajaria region took place in the early stages of the 17-th century and marked its rapid growth after 1820s. In 1878 when Ottomans lost Ajaria and ceded it to

Russia around 6000 Muslim Ajarians left for Turkey seeking asylum (Balci and Motika 2007). However, at that time the arrival of Turkic speaking Muslims, known as “Tatars” in the Tsarist era and classified “Azerbaijanis” under the Soviet rule took place. Generally, Russian authorities were by and large tolerant towards the Muslim population. By the end of the Tsarist era Georgia’s Muslim population constituted 20% of the overall population (Sanikidze and Walker 2004; Menagarishvili et al. 2013). The situation in Georgia and other Soviet countries has changed under the Soviet rule. In the 1920s and 1930s under the rule of the Soviet Union certain campaigns were introduced against the religious institutions.

Collapse of the Soviet Union put an end on restrictions of interests in religion in Georgia (Sanikidze and Walker 2004; Kobaidze 1999; Anderson 1994; Gachechiladze 1997). Currently, Muslim population of Georgia mainly constitutes of three communities: 1. ethnically Azerbaijani and mainly Shiite Muslims in Kvemo Kartli 2. ethnically Georgian, mainly Sunni Muslims in Ajaria 3. Pankisi Gorge Muslims, Kists of Vainakh descent (Menagarishvili et al. 2013).

Chapter1

Literature Review

The literature devoted to the study on Muslim population of Georgia can be mainly divided into three parts. A large amount of literature studies the Muslim population of Ajaria attempting to discuss the current situation in the region, particularly referring to ethnically Georgian Muslims. Another group of studies mainly deals with the Pankisi Gorge Muslims discussing their integration into Georgia's social and political life. The third group of works discusses the situation of Azerbaijani population of Georgia, referring again to their issues of integration.

Around 115.000 Muslims live in Ajaria according to the 2002 General Population Census of Georgia. Most of the Muslim population live in the upper part of Ajaria in the districts of Keda and Khulo. The main composition of Muslim population of Ajaria are ethnically Georgian Muslims (Nodia 2002; Liles 2012; Menagarishvili et al. 2013; Pelkmans 2002; Popovaite 2014).

The non-Muslim population of Ajaria complains about the changes in the ethnic and religious landscape of the region. They feel threatened due to the extensive movement of Turks into Ajaria. The public discontent among non-Muslim population have certain justifications. According to Menagarishvili (2013) the number of ethnic Turks residing in Batumi composes 24.000. Since there are no any official institution providing higher religious education a great number of students travel from Ajaria to Turkey for receiving theological education. The first flow of students from Ajaria left in 1993. They travelled to Turkey to receive religious education and came back to Georgia in 1999. Returning to Georgia they started working in different

mosques operating in the region (Balci and Motika 2007; Liles 2012; Sanikidze and Walker 2004; Menagarishvili et al. 2013). By the year of 2009, according to the statistics approximately 184 mosques were operating on the territory of Georgia. Among them approximately 140 were newly constructed mosques and solely 45 were cultural monuments (Menagarishvili et al. 2013).

Recently Batumi has attracted the attention being at the epicenter of tensions. Georgian and Turkish governments have signed an agreement regarding the construction of two mosques in Batumi. Signing of the agreement caused discontent among the Christian population of Georgia. The major matter of concern caused the issue of Aziziye mosque construction in Batumi (Menagarishvili et al. 2013). Christian population generally was against the construction of the mosque, its name and location. Protest actions took place in Batumi, which according to certain media sources were joined by Muslim population as well. It turned out that Georgian Muslims themselves were opposing the construction of the mosque under funding of Turkey. The construction of the mosque was presumably designed for ethnic Turkish Muslims living on the territory of Batumi, since they refused to pray in other Georgian mosques because of certain theological differences with local Muslim population of Georgia. Nevertheless, Georgian Muslims themselves never ratified this information. They explained their protest by claims that construction of the mosque would mainly serve as a cultural monument rather than an operating religious center (Menagarishvili et al. 2013). However, Muslims concurrently were asking for the building of the second mosque in Batumi, since during the Friday prayers there was not enough space for containing all the participants (Menagarishvili et al. 2013).

The Pankisi Gorge Muslims compose around 50.000 residents according to the 2002 General Population Census of Georgia (State Statistics Department of Georgia 2003). The Muslim residents of Pankisi mainly receive education in the Georgia's institution of higher

education. Unlike Ajarians travelling to Turkey to receive theological education, the Pankisi Gorge Muslims mainly leave for Arab countries for the religious education purposes (Prasad 2012; Nodia 2002; Sibrashvili 2014).

The connection with the Arab world marked its beginning with the arrival of two emissaries from the United Arab Emirates for selecting young adults to leave for Arab Emirates for receiving theological education between 1996 and 1999 (Prasad 2012). During that period, eleven young people from Pankisi Gorge left for the United Arab Emirates. Most of them arrived back to Georgia with the completion of the studies, but four of them stayed in the United Arab Emirates. After returning to Georgia they support the idea of returning to the authentic of “Pure Islam” (Menagarishvili et al. 2013, 68). This slogan of returning to the “Pure Islam” became a reason for associating the young people who received theological education in the United Arab Emirates as devotees of Wahhabism. However, these young people had little in common with this religious movement. They were rather supporting the idea on returning to the original religious texts. Currently the Muslim residents of Pankisi mainly travel to the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Syria (Sanikidze and Walker 2004; Nodia 2002; Menagarishvili et al. 2013; Sulghanishvili 2012; Sibrashvili 2014).

Despite the fact that residents of Pankisi Gorge are not of Georgian origin they are well adapted to the Georgian environment, speaking fluently Georgian language. However, the situation has changed with the growing trend of students travelling abroad to receive theological education. After returning to Georgia, they felt challenges in the reintegration processes into the social life of the country. Usually they return having forgotten Georgian language (Menagarishvili et al. 2013; Sulghanishvili 2012; Sibrashvili 2014). Moreover, the young generation of Pankisi Gorge express less adherence to the Georgian identity, and are less

integrated in the social environment of the country (Siprashvili 2014). They do not speak well Georgian language, which complicates their integration into Georgian society. Currently seven mosques function on the Pankisi territory, among which six are Salafist mosques and one is regarded as traditional (Siprashvili 2014).

Azerbaijanis mainly represent the Muslim community of the Kvemo Kartli region. The Azerbaijanis of Kvemo Kartli face almost the same problems as Ajarians and Pankisi Gorge Muslims. However, there is a higher concern over the language barrier among the Muslim community of Kvemo Kartli. Azerbaijani population of Georgia is the most poorly integrated Muslim community of Georgia. Most of the Azerbaijanis do not speak Georgian language (Prasad 2012). The Azerbaijani residents of Georgia are considered to be the most alienated part of the Muslim society of Georgia, and thus, the most apathetic and unconcerned one to the Georgian social environment. Their lower degree of socialization explains their indifference.

The issue of the learning Georgian language in the region remains the matter for concern. The government of Georgia launched specific programs for promoting the integration of the region into the social life of Georgia. In higher institutions of Georgia, the Government introduced the 1+4 program. This program allowed the young people of non-Georgian descent to pass their entrance exams in their native language and afterwards taking a one-year course on Georgian language, and only afterwards, they were able to turn to their major academic course (Menagarishvili et al. 2013). In order to receive higher religious education the Azerbaijanis of Georgia travel to Iran and Azerbaijan.

There are no specific schools for Muslims in Georgia to receive higher religious education within the country. The only way for receiving theological education within the country is through the madrassas at mosques, which serve as a parochial schools for receiving

the basics of the religious education (Nodia 2002; Prasad 2012; Sanikidze and Walker 2004; Liles 2012; Menagarishvili et al. 2013). However, the madrassas functioning in Georgia do not have legal status and documents provided by them cannot serve as legal documents on the theological education attained. Therefore, Muslims of Georgia have to travel to Muslim countries for receiving religious education and the choice of the country varies depending on the consideration of religion. Muslim population of Ajaria mainly travels to Turkey to receive theological education. Muslims of Pankisi Gorge travel to Saudi Arabia. The Azerbaijani population of Georgia leave for Iran or Azerbaijan to receive religious education (Menagarishvili et al. 2013; Sanikidze and Walker 2004).

It is worth mentioning that graduates of religious schools generally come back to Georgia and get a job in the local mosques of the Georgia. Considering their level of religious education, they generally command respect and are favored and honored by the local Muslim population of the country (Sanikidze and Walker 2004; Liles 2012; Balci and Motika 2007; Menagarishvili et al. 2013; Pelkmans 2002).

There are number of scholars that argue that graduates of religious schools in Muslim countries willingly or unwillingly turned to be influenced by one of the branches of Islam, depending on the type of confession in a given country (Sunni, Shia, Wahabism). Therefore, some scholars argue that pure depoliticization of Islam is not possible (Sanikidze and Walker 2004; Menagarishvili et al. 2013). The graduates of religious schools are frequently guided by the values construed in accordance with the national interests of the respective countries, where the religious education has been received. Consequently, it is necessary to take into consideration that those who received religious education abroad may possibly work in accordance with other countries' interests, rather than of Georgia's interests (Sanikidze and Walker 2004;

Menagarishvili et al. 2013). As an evidence may serve the obligation put by the Turkish State on the graduates of religious education in the Arab countries. The State of the Turkey obliges them to take retraining courses in the theological schools of Turkey lasting from one to two years in order to ensure their adaptation to particular features typical for Turkey. Thus, this example serves to disclose the view on Islam from the perspective of the peculiar national interests of the country. Nevertheless, the Georgian State does not implement any action of this kind. Consequently, it is difficult to assess whether the graduates of religious schools abroad are able to serve the national interests of Georgia (Sanikidze and Walker 2004; Menagarishvili et al. 2013).

To conclude it is evident that the absence of institutions providing higher religious education makes the Muslims of Georgia leave for other countries for attaining higher religious education. Returning to Georgia, they face the challenge of reintegration into Georgian society. However, among the three aforementioned Muslim communities of Georgia, Azerbaijani community of Georgia remains the most alienated and poorly integrated into Georgian society. Nevertheless, the language barrier is a matter of concern both for Azerbaijani and Pankisi Gorge Muslims placing them at disadvantage and hindering their integration into Georgia's social life.

Methodology

For testing the hypothesis and answering the research questions, the qualitative method of analysis is used in this Master's essay. Two research tools are used: content analysis and statistical information. Content analysis encompasses

- reports of international organizations dealing with Muslim minorities of Georgia,
- media resources,
- books.

For identifying the features of increase in external influences over the Muslim communities of Georgia, the study includes statistical information on the number of construction of mosques, madrassas and other religious organizations since Georgia's independence in 1991. The main objects of research are Muslim population of Ajaria, primarily ethnic Georgian Muslims, Muslim community of Kvemo Kartli region, primarily Azerbaijanis and Muslim population of Tbilisi. The statistical information on General Population Census of Georgia is used to assess the situation of Muslim population of Georgia. For examining the challenges faced by the Muslim communities of Georgia, the study uses international reports on minority issues of Georgia, media resources. For detecting the external influences on the religious landscape of the country, the study examines the activities of Turkey, Azerbaijan and Iran. In order to have a comprehensive picture on the activities of different religious organizations the study examines their activities and their targeted areas in Georgia. Last, but not least the study examines the social integration of Muslim communities into Georgian society.

Chapter 2

External Influences and Muslim Communities of Georgia

2.1 Turkey

Ajaria is the Georgian region with ethnically homogeneous population with different religious beliefs (Nodia 2002; Liles 2012; Menagarishvili et al. 2013; Pelkmans 2002; Popovaite 2014). Currently, Orthodox Christians and Muslims compose the majority of the population of Ajaria. According to Statistical Data of Georgia in 2002 the composition of population of Ajaria was as follows: 240.522 Orthodox Christians, 115.161 Muslims, 3162 confessors of Gregorian Armenian Church, 683 followers of Catholicism, 161 Judaists and 16.297 followers of other religions (State Statistics Department of Georgia 2003). The lack of civic harmony in the region creates certain challenges for the Muslims with Georgian origin.

Currently Muslim population of Ajaria has certain concerns regarding the fact that they are forced to prove their Georgian origin from time to time. Muslims of Ajaria prefer name themselves Georgian Muslims (Menagarishvili et al. 2013). In their turns, non-Muslims of Ajaria consider the intensive movement of ethnic Turks into Batumi as a threat. Currently six factories of Turkish textile function on the territory of Ajaria (International Investors Association 2015). The largest ones are the following: Ajaria Textile with annual export production composing 10 million USD, BTM Textile with 15 million USD annual export and Batumi Textile with 3 million 900 USD annual export (International Investors Association 2015). Local population is afraid that this may lead to the changes in the ethnic and religious picture of the country (Liles 2012; Menagarishvili et al. 2013).

The end of the 1980s marked a beginning of promoting the “Ilia-Chavchavadze-Society” lobbying for Georgia’s independence with the motto “Language, Religion & Homeland”. The reference to religion related exclusively, of course, to Orthodox Christianity (Balci and Motika 2007, p. 3). All the ethnic minorities of Georgia were opposing Gamsakhurdia’s policies tied with ethno-nationalism in the early stages of his presidency. The idea of linking Georgian national identity with the Christian Orthodoxy caused large protest among the Muslims of Georgian origin. On 22-23 April 1991 in Batumi, people gathered to raise their concerns regarding the discriminatory policies pushed by Gamsakhurdia. This was the first protest with religious implication in the republic since independence (Ivanov 2011).

The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in an increase of religious feelings of people and different types of official and non-official religious organizations willing to get advantage of the situation strengthened their outreach activities. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey constantly supported the idea of returning Georgia’s Ajarians to their Muslim roots (Ivanov 2011). The first religious penetrators to Ajaria were the followers of Fethullah Gülen. Their arrival took place even when the Soviet Union did not collapse yet. On this subject, Kireev in his article describes the arrival of Islamist missionaries attributing them to Gülenists: “On 11 January, 1990, the first group of Islamist missionaries crossed the border into Georgia at Sarpi and visited Ajaria and Tbilisi. It was warmly received everywhere. In May, the second mission of 37 set off in several cars and a bus loaded with presents. It visited Batumi, Tbilisi, Kazan, Ganja, Baku, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. This was how Gülen’s community started its missionary activities...” (Kireev 2003, p. 7). Nevertheless, it is difficult to prove that these

missionaries were Gülenists. By the middle of 2000s the proponents of Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan (1888-1959), who advocated the ideas of Said Nursî (1873-1960), joined Gülen supporters.

The missionary activities encompassed diverse set of actions. The missionaries were propagandizing Islam by interpreting it, conscripting young men who demonstrated interest in religion to study Islam abroad. On top of that, they were spreading religious literature, bringing together people in different type of charity gatherings. The missionaries also supported the funding for buildings of new mosques and restoring the old ones and establishment of new madrassas. By the middle of 2000s Gülenists ran only one madrassa in Batumi and the followers of Mustafa Süngür ran six madrassas (Balci and Motika 2007). Approximately at the same time, in the middle of 2000s the members of the Naqshbandi Order headed by Mahmut Ustaosmanoğlu were making attempts in stepping with their activities (Balci and Motika 2007).

The dynamics of Turkish-Georgian relations is visible through the growing volumes of trade. In 1995-2003 the trade volume did not exceed \$200 million, while in 2004-2007 the trade volume doubled as a result of Georgia's leadership economic policy following the "Rose Revolution" and due to Turkey's active economic policy. Free Trade Agreement signed in 2007 resulted in dramatic increases in the trade volumes between Georgia and Turkey. In parallel with extending the economic ties with Georgia, Turkey does not neglect policies in the religious, educational and cultural domains. Officially, three state institutes coordinate the activities of the religious, educational and cultural domains. Those are the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centers and the Presidency of the Religious Affairs (Diyamet). Starting from 1994 the TIKA implements extensive programs. The completed projects of recent years encompass diverse spheres: "improvement of social and economic infrastructures and services, organization of educational programs(vocational, language

teaching), repairing and furnishing educational centers, health care, improvement of drinking water and sanitary”(Ter-Matevosyan 2014, p.113). The TIKA 2012 annual report shows that Georgia is the 7-th biggest recipient of TIKA’s financial, vocational and technical assistance (Yildiz 2012). It is worth mentioning that the assistance of TIKA is primarily targeted at the territories of Georgia with dense Muslim population and solely few projects are implemented in Tbilisi. In the framework of TIKA’s projects the rehabilitation of Georgia’s Kosali madrassa took place in the Kosali village (Yildiz 2012). It is noteworthy that according to the 2002 General Population Census of Georgia Kosali is the village with 100 % Azerbaijani population (State Statistics Department of Georgia 2003).

Starting from 2007 Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centers began their activities worldwide, aiming to bring balance in the activities of “Gülen Schools” by boosting the interest towards Turkish history, language, literature, culture and art. The opening of Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centre in Georgia took place in May 2012. During the opening ceremony of the Centre the chairman of the foundation, Ali Fuat Bilkan stressed the perfect level of economic cooperation between Turkey and Georgia and emphasized the importance of the centre serving as a bridge for extending the cooperation in the cultural sphere. On top of that, the Turkish embassy in Georgia states that Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Center has also opened the departments of Turkish studies in Akaki Tsereteli State University located in Kutaisi and in the State Educational University located in Akhaltsikhe, which is a city that contains a large number of Armenian community (Ter-Matevosyan 2014, p.114).

The Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) has also encompassed diverse aspects, primary target, however remains on religious and cultural issues. In comparison to TIKA and Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centre, the Diyanet began its activities as early as in 1924 and

extended its activities abroad from 1980s. Thus, the Diyanet has far more extensive experience with abroad Muslim Communities. The assistance of Diyanet is visible in organization of haji, trainings for theologians, spreading Islamic literature in Georgian language, provision of scholarships for receiving theological education in Turkey. Besides, in 1995 the Diyanet has established the Eurasian Islamic Council (EIC). The establishment of EIC has become a significant step for endorsing the interests of Turkey among the Muslim population of CIS countries. Up to date eight conferences were organized by the EIC. The representatives of Georgian Muslim Community also took place in the conferences including the muftis of Ajaria (Ter-Matevosyan 2014).

Besides the official institutions involved in the activities of promoting Islam in Georgia, the early years of independence saw the involvement of numerous non-official Turkish organizations in the region as well. Former Deputy Minister of Georgia Saydaev tells that he had meeting with missionaries of Istanbul. However, the missionaries were primarily from informal Islamic structure, not from Diyanet (Ivanov 2011).

In addition to the aforementioned three official institutes, other Turkish educational organizations also operate in Georgia. The widely known schools belonging to network of Fethullah Gülen are widespread in Georgia. They function under the patronage of Çağlar educational institutions (Ter-Matevosyan 2014). Çağlar Educational Institution functions in Georgia since 1992 when the opening of private Demirel College in Tbilisi took place. From this time they have extended their activities and spread across Georgia. Çağlar Nikoloz Tsereteli International School (CIS) operate in Georgia since 2006 following the British curriculum. They have opened schools in Batumi, Marneuli, Rustavi and three schools in Tbilisi totally accounting for seven schools. On top of that, Çağlar International Schools (CIS) provide opportunities for

students to participate in the two-three weeks training language programs in Turkey, US and UK. The International Black Sea University functioning in Tbilisi from 1995 also falls under the patronage of Çağlar Educational Institutions (Dzagnidze 2013) .

The interesting fact about the establishment of Turkish schools is that the majority of them were established after the “Rose Revolution” during the presidency of Mikhayil Saakashvili (Ter-Matevosyan 2014). It is important to mention that the staff of the school is mainly composed of Turkish citizens. Particular attention is given to the Turkish language Olympiads taking place in Turkey, providing students with an opportunity to visit Turkey and get acquainted with the sponsors of the program. Regardless of the fact that the schools are established by Gülenists, there is no obvious propaganda for the Gülen movement, or, primarily Turkey. Nevertheless, the Turkish flag along with the Georgian flag flatters in front of all the buildings and both the Turkish and Georgian flags are depicted on the logos. Either way, students and teachers come across every day with the symbols associated with Turkey (Ter-Matevosyan 2014).

The Presidency for the Religious Affairs of Turkey (Diyanet) also takes part in the educational issues on religious domain. The Diyanet promotes networking with the official organization speaking on behalf of Ajarian Muslims (Muftiat). The Presidency for the Religious Affairs of Turkey mainly relied on the Turkish consulate located in Baku for the activities, like disseminating literature or appointment of clerics, selection of students to receive theological education in different departments of Turkish Universities (Mkrтчyan 2010). The number of students leaving for Turkey is growing at a constant level. Only in 2006 29 young students from Ajaria left for Turkey to receive religious education in the İnegöl city. In 2008 the leader of the Muftiat, Bekir Bolkvadze made a decision to send abroad 49 young students to learn Quran.

Moreover, the Georgian Muslim diaspora has played a significant role in spreading Islam following the collapse of the Soviet Union. They were involved in activities such as translation of Islamic literature for dissemination. (Ivanov 2011).

The Turkish influence in Ajaria is also visible through restoration and building of new mosques and prayer houses starting from the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 2002, the media reports state approximately 102 mosques in Ajaria. The funding for the restoration purposes and establishment of new mosques is not publicized and the supporters prefer to remain unknown. In this regard, the former Mufti of Ajaria Bekir Bolkvadze and advisor to the Ajarian Government states that the construction of new mosques in Ajaria was realized without any foreign help and that the Georgian authorities did not assist either. Bolkvadze states that one of the functioning madrassas in Batumi operates exclusively due to private donations (Ivanov 2011).

However, it is impossible to imagine the construction of such a large number of mosques without foreign help increasing year by year. In 2005 the number of mosques in Ajaria reached 137, and only one year later, in 2006 the number of mosques had risen up to 159. For the year of 2008, reports state that number of mosques in Ajaria reached 174. However, it is worth mentioning that there are cases where the mosques does not present classical type of mosques, rather they are buildings adapted for religious purposes. Nevertheless, there are much issues still remained unresolved: up to now, there are no any legal documents reporting the official number of mosques or religious buildings. A large number of constructions function not on legal basis. The key problem is that this concern applies not only for Ajaria, but also across Georgia (Menagarishvili et al. 2013). Ruslan Baramidze in his study conducted through 2003-2008 states that over 150 buildings adapted to religious purposes function in Georgia. Among these 150

buildings, 95 were mosque-schools, 41 were mosques, 18 Islamic educational organizations and 2 buildings of other types (Baramidze 2008 cited in Ivanov 2011).

Such a large number of religious constructions undoubtedly can serve as signs of spiritual revival and strengthening of cultural ties with Turkey. The Turkey's stance in this regard is evident. Turkey's Chairman of the Union of Friendly Relations with Georgia, Sekerci stated that: "It is in Turkey's national interests to keep Georgia Muslim. If the Georgian Muslims embrace Christianity they will oppose Islam and Turkey. The Muslims of Georgia love Turkey or at least respect it. Those who embrace Christianity will defend the official ideology; this means that Turkey should work with the Muslims of Georgia. This is its right and this is its duty... In this region, autonomy rests on Islam. If they destroy Islam, they will also be destroying the region's autonomy." (Baramidze 2008 cited in Ivanov 2011, p.83).

Based on this statement it can be argued that Turkey was pursuing several goals through a number of steps. The first and the foremost task was the sustentation of Muslim community in Ajaria. Turkey attempted to restore its influence in the region by instilling Turkish orientation among the society, elite. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey slowly began its economic expansion in Ajaria through constant support of the region. Non-Muslim population does not favor the current situation and is worried about the growing presence of Turkey in the region. Moreover, there is a growing discontent among the Christian population of Ajaria on the activities of religious organizations funded by Turkey. They complain on free distribution of religious literature in the region, opening of madrassas. They consider all of these activities as an expansionist policy run by Turkey (Menagarishvili et al. 2013).

The fear of non-Muslims is not motiveless. Starting from 2010, an NGO of the Union of Georgian Muslims functions in Ajaria. The head of this NGO states that the main agenda of the

organization is education. The organization presents and explain the true essence of Islam and its fundamental values. The organization systematically arranges lectures open to the public and generally, youth interested in religious issues attend the lectures (Menagarishvili et al. 2013).

Another aspect of concern is the question on recovery of historical and cultural monuments on the territory of Georgia and Turkey reactivated after the pause in 2007. The question has its background back in 2007, when Turkey and Georgia were negotiating on these issues, but did not reach a mutual agreement. Previously negotiations failed, in particular, as a result of a decisive confrontation of the Georgian Patriarch Ilia II. Due to his high prestige in society (according to surveys, about 90% of the population trusts the Georgian Orthodox Church and Patriarch personally), he was able to de facto veto and prevent the signing of a definitive agreement (Vardanyan 2011). The main reason for such a confrontation was the fear that as a result of the agreement the Muslim factor in Georgia will further strengthen and, therefore, increase the influence of Turkey.

Nevertheless, it is important to mention that despite the fact that negotiations stopped mainly due to disagreements between Georgian political and religious elites, the Georgian side provoked the resumption of negotiations. In April of 2010 Georgian Foreign Minister Vashadze during his visit to Turkey recalled the pending negotiations and expressed hope that this time the parties will manage to come to a definite agreement on issue of cultural monuments (Vardanyan 2011).

The issue on cultural monuments was also discussed during visit of Georgian Patriarch Ilia II and a return visit to Georgia of President of Diyanet (Religious Affairs) Mehmet Görmez. During both meetings, Görmez was underlying the importance of peaceful coexistence of people with different religious beliefs. Görmez stressed the importance of establishment peaceful

relations between religious institutions. He referred to good neighboring ties between Georgia and Turkey. According to Görmez the existence of Georgians in Turkey and Turks in Georgia brings these two countries much closer (diyanet.gov.tr 2014b). In his turn, Georgian Patriarch Ilia II during the meeting in Turkey spoke about extremely close relations between Turkey and Georgia. As a supportive example the Patriarch brought the existence of 311 mosques in Georgia, a number of madrassas and a Turkish Cultural Center. According to Patriarch Ilia II these facts speak about the freedom of Muslims in Georgia. Patriarch expressed his happiness regarding the restoration of Georgian churches in Turkey (diyanet.gov.tr 2014a). In response to this, President of Diyanet, Mehmet Görmez expressed his happiness regarding the existence of 311 mosques. Nevertheless, he added that most of those mosques are just small temples in villages. Görmez stressed that there is a need for establishing new mosques for performing Friday and Eid prayers. On top of that, Görmez underlined his conviction that Patriarch Ilia II assists the Muslims in Georgia and tries to give solution to all concerns expressed by Muslim population of Georgia (diyanet.gov.tr 2014a).

The significant step in this regard is the joint protocol between Georgia and Turkey regarding the restoration of the Oshki and Ishkhanı churches in Turkey and the construction of two mosques in Georgia: the Aziziye Mosque in Batumi and the Ahmediye Mosque in Meshketia. Görmez expressed his hope that the construction of mosques and restoration of churches will take place according to Protocol (diyanet.gov.tr 2014a).

Nevertheless, it is important to mention that Georgian achievements in this agreement are very limited. The restoration of historical monuments is advantageous rather for Turkey than for Georgia. One important detail needs to be considered. If the aforementioned churches are restored in Turkey, the worship will take place very rarely. Small number of Georgians,

following the Georgian Orthodox Church reside on this territory. Thus, the restored Georgian churches in Turkey will not be operating. Consequently, this achievement cannot have for Georgia religious and political importance. After recovery, if these churches remain inactive, they will have only the status of cultural monuments.

On the other hand, the restoration of mosques in Georgia has much more importance for Turkey. The most important fact is that these mosques will be active religious structures. The Georgian side has concerns regarding the building of Aziziye mosque in Batumi. Georgian society is very skeptical about the construction of new mosques. One of the Georgian journalist have called this mosque in Batumi "the new museum of occupation under the guise of friendship."(Vardanyan 2011).

Given the fact that today 30% of the population in Ajaria is composed of Muslims (population - 376,016 people, of whom 115,161 - Muslims), the building of the mosque may bring to certain implications for Georgia. The building of a new mosque may worsen the relations between Muslims and followers of Georgian Orthodox Church. Undoubtedly, the activities of Muslim religious institutions will activate the Muslim population. This step will play a significant role in strengthening the influence of Islam and Turkey among the Muslim population in Ajaria, especially taking into account the fact that the majority of Muslims in Ajaria are Sunni Muslims, which is another advantageous factor for Turkish side. Turkish consistent protection for religious rights of their fellow Muslims is not visible solely in Georgia, but even in Europe. Current president of Turkey a number of times has made appeals for German Turks to feel a part of the Great Turkey, learn Turkish and continue the resistance for assimilation. Thus, for Georgia the restoration of the churches on the territory of Turkey can be considered an achievement only in the cultural sphere (Gezer and Reimann 2011).

However, it should be noted that the restoration of Oshki and Ishkhani churches concerns not only Georgia and Turkey, but Armenia as well. The fact is that the two of the marked churches are of Armenian origin and cannot be considered part of Georgian cultural heritage. The architect Marutyan in his book “At the root of Armenian Classical Architecture” in the chapter of “Architectural Monuments of Taik” speaks about the Oshki and Ishkhani churches. Marutyan writes in this regard, Taik and its medieval monuments, including Banak and Ishkhani churches built in the 7-th century, and Hahuvanq and Oshki churches built in the 10-th century are not Georgian. Marutyan states that this issue is not a matter of appeal. These churches are Armenian. Marutyan proves his point based on consistent analysis of different sources. Marutyan also notes that “until the last quarter of the XI century Chalkedon Armenians were residing in Taik, and the area was a part of Great Hayk” (Marutyan 2003).

Consequently, Georgian and Turkish sides are negotiating over the Armenian cultural heritage in Turkey. Thus, it can be stated that Turkey doubly benefited; on the one hand, the transfer of Armenian churches to Georgian side can become a cause for tensions in the Armenia-Georgia relations. On the other hand, Turkey gets operating mosques in the parts of Georgia with significant Muslim population. Thereby Turkey may enhance its influence in one of the densely populated Muslim region of Georgia. The new mosque may become an important policy weapon of Turkey, which may threaten Georgian identity and trigger multiethnic conflict, thus, jeopardizing territorial integrity of the country (Vardanyan 2011).

Currently, the protection of cultural heritage on the territory of Turkey, historically Tao-Klarjeti is among the objectives of the new government as well. During 2013, the Ministry of Culture and Monument Protection of Georgia together with the Georgian National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation held negotiations with the Turkish side on execution of operations

on rehabilitation of Ishkhani and Oshki churches. The first joint meeting of Turkish and Georgian experts took place in the Ishkhani Monastery complex in April 2013. The Turkish side welcomed the recommendations and remarks from the Georgian side. Turkish and Georgian experts together will develop the design of work on restoration of Ishkhani and Oshki monasteries. The Turkish and Georgian side agreed to work in accordance with international standards and norms, the conduct of accurate scientific research is of utmost importance in this regard for the restoration of the original forms for maintaining all the features and details of the antiquity. The Georgian side has already prepared its recommendations and remarks for Turkish side to take into consideration in the process of restore (Gunia-Kuznetsova 2014).

Non-Muslim minority religious groups have certain concerns regarding the equal provision of subsidies by Georgian government for restoration of religious buildings. According to Georgia's 2013 International Religious Freedom Report "The Ministry of Culture and Protection of Monuments provided 4.3 million GEL (\$2.5 million) for the restoration of religious buildings on cultural heritage sites. The ministry allocated one percent of the funding, or 25,000 GEL (\$14,367), for planning the restoration of the Shamkorets church. The restoration of the mosque in Akhaltsikhe was completed in 2012 purely with government funding" (United States Department of State 2014, p.4).

Geopolitical and economic interests of the country pursued by the elites can explain the compliance of the political authorities of Georgia to the Turkish demands: a strategic partnership with Turkey and uninterrupted growth of Turkish investments in Georgia's economy. Nevertheless, such a principle design of the political agenda for Georgia a country and a society with 83.9% of population practicing Orthodoxy may have certain implications. Georgia, the

country that constantly faces the threat of territorial division, should not underestimate the ethno-religious factor while designing its priorities.

2.2 Azerbaijan

Azerbaijanis compose the largest ethno-religious minority of Georgia counting for approximately 45.5 % of Kvemo Kartli region. The Kvemo Kartli region is composed of five administrative districts: Gardabani, Marneuli, Dmanisi, Bolnisi and Tsalka. According to the 2002 General Population Census of Georgia, 284.761 ethnic Azerbaijanis reside on the territory of Georgia, among which 224.606 reside in Kvemo Kartli region. Azerbaijanis compose around 83.1 % of the Marneuli districts population, 66.8 % of the Dmanisi district, 66% of the Bolnisi district population, 43.7 % of the Gardabani district population and 9.5% of the Tsalka district (Tolerance 2008).

The actions among Azerbaijani community of Georgia in the religious field traditionally were considered to be of moderate intensity. The Muslim Identity was rather based on ethnicity and culture rather than religion (Prasad 2012). The representative of “Geyrat” movement in the Marneuli region of Georgia, Zumurud Qurbanov says that, “for Azeris, Islam is not a way of life, but closer to a way of thinking. While many Georgian Azeris observe the fast of Ramadan, for example, others do not. Others might observe it only for a few days” (Prasad 2012, p. 5) Moreover, Qurbanov adds that there are Azerbaijanis that even eat pork which demonstrates that they are not fanatics of their professed religion and “more European than most Muslims living in Europe” (Prasad 2012, p. 5).

However, on the contrary to Qurbanov's statements Vagiph Akberov, the head sheikh of the Administration of Georgian Muslims and mullah in Tbilisi presents different picture on this issue. According to Akberov, currently the majority of Azerbaijanis in Georgia "observe and hold on to Islam" (Prasad 2012, p. 5). He adds that in contrast to the first years followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union, when only small number of Azerbaijanis were roughly familiar with the fundamentals and principles of their religion, currently the rise in the levels of religiosity and spirituality in Georgia and across the post-Soviet region is visible. According to the head of the Tolerance Public Association for Human Rights, Elbrus Mamedov, currently more and more Azerbaijanis of Georgia make pilgrimage to Mecca and pay visits to various places of worship in Iran (Human Rights Monitoring Group of Ethnic Minorities 2012).

Correspondingly, the expert in religious field and lecturer at Tbilisi State University, Leila Jejelava pays attention to the fact that while before solely old people were attending mosques, currently young people mostly attend mosques (Prasad 2012). For instance, Juma mosque located in Tbilisi is usually full on prayer services on Fridays and the majority of people gathered for worship compose young people. It is important to mention that not only local population of Azerbaijanis attend the mosque, it serves also to growing number of foreigners. On a regular Friday, besides local Muslim population, there are Muslims from Arabic countries, Pakistan etc.

Despite the fact, that officially the Juma mosques is Sunni, both Sunnis and Shias attend the mosque, indicating good relation between two branches of Islam in Georgia. On top of that, in Kvemo Kartli region other mosques and different religious organizations also serve both for Shias and for Sunnis. It is difficult to give exact numbers of denominations among Azerbaijani community of Georgia. Various sources state different numbers. There are estimates referring to

60-70% of Azerbaijani population being Shia, other estimates state that population is equally divided between Sunnis and Shias. Nevertheless, there are no exact official figures in this regard. Large mosques in the Kvemo Kartli region of Georgia are found in the following towns: Marneuli, Dmanisi, Bolnisi. Marneuli is usually considered the capital among the Azerbaijani populated regions of Georgia. Moreover, besides the large mosques a great number of small informal mosques operate almost in every part of the country where Azerbaijani population reside. In small villages, even ordinary houses serve as worship places. Consequently, the precise number is difficult to estimate. However, approximate estimates state a number of 79 mosques in the Shida Kartli, Kakheti and Kvemo Kartli regions of Georgia. It is important to note that 37 mosques out of 79 were constructed following the collapse of the Soviet Union and since Georgia's independence in 1991 (Prasad 2012).

One of the major problems faced by the Azerbaijani population of Kvemo Kartli region is their high level of alienation from Georgian society, which is mainly due to their lack of knowledge of Georgian language. The problem of education is among the major matter of concerns, placing Azerbaijanis at a disadvantage.

Officially, Georgia and Azerbaijan signed two documents in the domain of education. The first agreement was signed in 1997, which was aimed at promoting cooperation in the field of attestation of pedagogical and scientific staff. The main goal of the 1997 agreement was to address the educational concerns of Azerbaijanis residing in Georgia and Georgians residing in Azerbaijan by establishing professional exchanges. The core problem lied in the absence of institutions where people could conduct bilingual training courses for teachers. The lack of institutions had negative impact on the number of teachers working at the schools where

Georgian Azerbaijanis were studying. Nevertheless, the 1997 agreement did little for alleviating the problem (Shiriyev and Kornely 2013).

By the early 2000s, Georgia and Azerbaijan took steps to solve the problems in the domain of education. The second cooperation agreement in the education field was signed in 2004 by Georgian Ministry of Education and Science, and the Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan (Shiriyev and Kornely 2013). Moreover, Georgia initiated a step for reducing the isolation of the Georgian minority communities through insurance of better knowledge of the Georgian language and through integration of minority communities' schools into the Georgian educational system. The government of Georgia made considerable reductions in the use of Azerbaijani language in the schools, by replacing Azerbaijani textbooks by Georgian ones. In addition, the Government of Georgia standardized the system of education in terms of duration, since Azerbaijani system of education provides eleven years for the schools, whereas the Georgian system of education provides twelve years for the schools. Nevertheless, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Education keeps on providing Azerbaijani schools of Georgia with textbooks for the three years of elementary school. In addition, a number of Azerbaijani companies were involved in the process of renovating a number of Azerbaijani schools on the territory of Georgia (Shiriyev and Kornely 2013).

On September 23, 2010 the former Education Minister of Azerbaijan, Misir Mardanov and the former Georgian Education Minister, Dmitriy Shashkin opened two schools in Georgia repaired by assistance provided by Heydar Aliev Foundation. One of the repaired schools is school N3 located in Gardabani, the town in the Kvemo Kartli region densely populated by Azerbaijanis. Another one is the School N2 in Dmanisi town in the region of Kvemo Kartli, again roughly populated by Azerbaijanis. In addition to this, the Heydar Aliev Foundation

renovated Azerbaijani school located in Tbilisi again in the year of 2010. The schools underwent complete renovation: floors of the buildings were reconstructed, new windows, doors and heating systems were set up (Kirtzkhalia 2010a).

Despite the aforementioned reforms in the field of education Azerbaijanis remains alienated from the Georgian society. One of the major obstacles to integration is the language barrier. As a clear example of poor integration of Azerbaijanis into Georgian society may serve small number of Azerbaijani youth entering Georgian Universities. According to the 2005 National Assessment and Examination Center 32.000 University applicants participated in the entrance exams. Only 26 Azerbaijanis entered Georgian Universities for the year of 2005 among 284561 ethnic Azerbaijanis living in Georgia (Huseynzade 2006).

Another major concern of the Azerbaijani schools is the personnel maintenance problem. There is a shortage of bilingual teachers in the staff of the schools. There are not enough specialists possessing both Georgian and Azerbaijani languages for teaching Georgian language courses at Azerbaijani schools. These problems demonstrate in part the failure and weaknesses of reforms to address the educational concerns. Currently the number of Azerbaijani schools ranges from 164-230. There is no exact number since according to different sources, many schools in the remote villages were shut down. The closure of schools in remote areas resulted in negative consequences. This led to the aggravation of the Azerbaijani children education, since the walk to schools for many of the students became very difficult, it even stopped the students coming from conservative families attending the schools (Shiriyev and Kornely 2013).

Another matter of concerns for Azerbaijanis in Georgia is the lack of materials and textbooks from Azerbaijan. Azerbaijanis in Georgia claim that they do not receive necessary materials in time. According to Fazil Hasanov, director of Marneuli Cultural Center, during

1990s more than 55.000 Azerbaijani pupils were studying in Georgia. By the year of 2013 the number of pupils reduced to 28.000. Azerbaijani side explains the reduction of number of pupils emphasizing several problems. According to Azerbaijani's Minister of Education, Misir Mardanov, the number of Azerbaijani schools decreases every year, the principals of schools are appointed without knowledge of Azerbaijani language. In addition, the staff of the school lacks professionalism. Moreover, Georgia does not possess facilities for preparing staff knowing Azerbaijani language (news.az 2009).

In order to resolve the issue of preparing staff with the knowledge of Azerbaijani language, in 2008 the opening of Georgia-Azerbaijan Humanitarian University took place in Marneuli. The University is named after Heydar Aliyev and aims at preparing teachers for working at the Azerbaijani schools of Georgia. In 2008 Azerbaijani side reported a number of 124 Azerbaijani schools operating in Georgia and a need for preparing professional pedagogical staff for working at the Azerbaijani schools of Georgia (avciya.az 2008). Although in this way the personnel maintenance problem may be solved, nevertheless the isolation problem will not be reduced, since the staff of the schools will be mainly composed of Azerbaijanis.

For youth intending to continue the education at the Georgian Universities, the Azerbaijani language education places them at a disadvantageous position. Uneven teaching of Georgian language in Azerbaijani schools constrains the chances of passing entrance exams for entering Georgian universities. On the other side, the study in accordance with Georgian curriculum limits the opportunities for entering Azerbaijani Universities (Sultanova 2012).

For supporting integration of ethnic minorities in the education at Georgian Universities, Georgia undertakes certain steps. One of the example is 1+4 Program. The long-term goal of this provision is that after graduation, the Azerbaijani youth could serve as a bridge between the

Azerbaijani communities in Georgia and the Georgian State. The educated Azerbaijani youth could find a job in local administrations of the Azerbaijani communities and/or fill the positions in the ministries of government. Nevertheless, for such kind of achievements, both Georgian and Azerbaijani sides need cooperation (Shiriyev and Kornely 2013).

Besides promoting cooperation in the bilateral from in the field of education, on 21-st of May 2013, within the framework of the third forum on the Unification of the Caucasian Universities, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey signed a protocol on cooperation between the Universities. It provides an opportunity for students to take part in exchange programs of Caucasian Universities (Pipia 2013).

Although the Azerbaijani side is active in assisting the Azerbaijani community of Georgia, little is done for supporting integration of Azerbaijanis in the social life of Georgia. A few examples can demonstrate the cooperation among Azerbaijani and Georgian sides for integration of Azerbaijanis into Georgian society.

As an example of cooperation for promoting education and reduction of language barrier is the publication of the edited version of Azerbaijani-Georgian dictionary. The publication became possible with the assistance of Georgia-Azerbaijan Humanitarian University and the Institute of Caucasian Studies under the Tbilisi State University after Javakhishvili. The dictionary is composed of two volumes and is designed for Azerbaijani pupils, students studying in Georgia, specialists of Turkic philology. The support for the publication of dictionary primarily came from the state committee on work with diaspora of Azerbaijan (Sultanova 2012).

In addition to the cooperation in the educational domain, Georgia and Azerbaijan strengthen the cooperation in the cultural field either. Various facts indicate intensification of

cultural dialogues between Azerbaijan and Georgia. The Azerbaijani side is active in translating national books from Azerbaijani into Georgian. Georgian books are also translated into Azerbaijani for increasing the knowledge on Georgian literature and culture among the Azerbaijani population of Georgia. In order to strengthen the cultural ties between Georgia and Azerbaijan, there are regular exhibitions of Azerbaijani artists held in Georgian Art Museum (Shiriyev and Kornely 2013). On top of that, there are two Azerbaijani Cultural Centers operating in Georgia, one in Tbilisi and another in Marneuli a town densely populated by Azerbaijanis (Shiriyev and Kornely 2013).

The renovation of Tbilisi State Azerbaijani Drama Theatre is another prospect of cooperation of Azerbaijanis and Georgians in the cultural field. The Theatre primarily holds performances of Azerbaijani cultural pieces. Although, the Azerbaijanis in Georgia are concerned with the fact that the director of the theatre is Georgian, the concern has not been addressed in public. Moreover, in May 2013 the opening of former home of the Azerbaijani writer Mirza Fatali Akhundov serving as a museum took place. Georgian Prime Minister, Bidzina Ivanishvili take part in the opening ceremony of the museum together with Minister of Culture of Azerbaijan, Abulfaz Garayev and the former Minister of Culture and Monument Protection of Georgia, Guram Odisharia. Moreover, the President of SOCAR and the Azerbaijani Ambassador to Georgia attended the opening ceremony (Shiriyev and Kornely 2013).

SOCAR Petroleum Georgia plays an important role in the promotion of Azerbaijani culture and assistance for Azerbaijani community of Georgia. SOCAR established own representation in Georgia from November 2006. Based on the information of “GeoStat” SOCAR Petroleum Georgia, Ltd is the largest company of Georgia in 2012 and 2013 according to the

research conducted in the Ilia State University of the Centre of Economic Research and Consultations of the business department The company owns the network of petrol stations across Georgia and exports the oil. SOCAR Petroleum Georgia, Ltd is the supplier of nearly 70% of imported fuel in Georgia (representation.ge 2013a). According to the head of the SOCAR company, Rovnag Abdullayev, 90% of the gas supply of Georgia is provided by SOCAR company (Abbasova 2015). Such a high control over the gas supply of Georgia pushed the Competition Agency of Georgia to study the possible monopolistic position of SOCAR Georgia in the market of liquefied petroleum gas (azxeberlenti.com 2015).

Similarly to TIKA's activities in Georgia, SOCAR company is also extensively incorporated in assisting the implementation of programs in the cultural, educational domains of areas, targeting territories densely populated by Azerbaijanis. The Youth Center in Marneuli operates primarily with the support of the SOCAR company. SOCAR consistently supports the Marneuli Youth Center in the implementation of cultural, educational and sport activities. For instance, the social program "Art starts with children" gave master class of weaving of carpets in May-June 2013 in the Azerbaijani Cultural Centre in Marneuli. The invited instructor, Naiba Karimova, a prominent specialist of carpet weaving in Azerbaijan, conducted the master class (representation.ge 2013c)

The Youth Center is equipped with all necessary facilities, it has a library, and cultural days are organized constantly. Moreover, the center provides youth with educational opportunities, particularly it organizes the courses on Georgian language for local population of Azerbaijani youth (Shiriyev and Kornely 2013). In addition, on May 12 2013 the chess competition of the "Marneuli Cup" took place with the assistance from SOCAR company. The competition targeted children and teenagers from seven to sixteen years. Forty-eight chess

players from the municipality of Marneuli took part in the competition. The competition sets a goal to raise interest among youth for chess playing and develop the Marneuli region. The winners received the presents and the cups. A number of prominent chess players of Georgia as well as representatives of the Ministry of Reintegration in Kvemo Kartli were present at the tournament. Both media representatives of Georgia and Azerbaijan were present during the competition (representation.ge 2013b).

Since the establishment in 2006 up to 2013 the representation of SOCAR company in Georgia made an investments composing around 26.000 USD. The investment activities encompassed wide range of issues: restoration of kindergartens and schools, hospitals; building of bridges, roads; reconstruction of water supply systems, assistance to orphanages, sport federations, assistance in providing education to more than 1150 students, coverage of scholarship programs of 335 students, provision of funding for medical treatment (representation.ge 2015).

Another way of cultural promotion in the Azerbaijani community of Georgia is the publication of newspapers and journals. One of the journals is called Qarapapaqlar, which began its publications from 2007. The journal is published in Azerbaijani and Russian languages and the main focus is on cultural and historical issues. The journal is disseminated for free among the Azerbaijani communities of Georgia. The other journal is Meydan, which is published since 2008. The journal mainly deals with political and cultural issues and is published only in Azerbaijani language (Shiriyev and Kornely 2013).

Currently more than 20 Azerbaijani NGOs function in Georgia, among which some NGOs assist in publications of the journals. In addition to the publication of aforementioned journals, the Azerbaijani community also has publications of the following newspapers:

“Gürcüstan, Ziya, Tehsil, Varliq, Yenilenmiş Mekteb, Gürcüstan Azərbaycanlıları and Region Press” (Shiriyev and Kornely 2013). It is worth mentioning that the neither of journals and only few newspapers are published in Georgian. Only some of the aforementioned newspapers are published both in Georgian and Azerbaijani languages. This in its turn creates certain obstacles for cooperation in the media field.

First, since the majority of the publication are available only in Azerbaijani language, this constraints the opportunities of community to use media as a resources for raising the issues of concern, it hinders the delivery of community’s message. Secondly, the media offices of the Azerbaijani community are mainly located in the regions with majority Azerbaijanis residing, than in Tbilisi, where the largest part of relevant decisions are taken. There is lack of cooperation between Georgian media sources and the Azerbaijani ones. Taking into consideration the fact that media plays an important role in the shaping perception on cross-communities; there is a need for collaboration among media structures. At first glance, it may seem that lack of information of Azeri minorities regarding political and social situation in Georgia may turn them to be less assertive in their demands. Nevertheless, the deficit in the institutionalized channels via which people can formulate and express their interests may result in escalation of protests and demonstrations.

As an example may serve the spontaneous demonstration that took place in 2004 and 2005 over unfair land distribution resulting in deplorable consequences. The Azerbaijani population raises their complaints on issues that most of the landowners of the region are not from Kvemo Kartli and there is a need for a complete redistribution of the lands. During a rally in Kulari village of Marneuli district an Azerbaijani woman was killed and several people were injured (International Crisis Group 2006).

One of the important causes of such protests is the problem of representation by Azerbaijanis in the Georgian state system. There are only three Azerbaijani members of Parliament among 150 members of Georgian parliament. In addition, in the Kvemo Kartli region, where the majority of Azerbaijani population is concentrated there are no Azerbaijani heads of municipalities. A very small number of people work in the law enforcement agencies of judicial authority. Lack of knowledge of Georgian language hinders the integration of Azerbaijanis into political and social life of Georgia and aggravates the sense of isolation (International Crisis Group 2006).

Starting from 1990 when there was an increase in the escalations between Georgia's nationalists and ethnic Azerbaijanis residing in Georgia, the Azerbaijanis established the public movement Geyrat aimed to stop the migration of Azerbaijanis through a dialogue with Gamsakhurdia and his supporters. Protests were organized to raise the concerns regarding the changes in the names of villages from Azerbaijani to Georgia and seeking to push the idea for transforming Kvemo Kartli into autonomous region (International Crisis Group 2006).

Besides the aforementioned facts, there is a growing trend of Azerbaijani tourists visiting Georgia. The Azerbaijanis compose the second largest group of tourists visiting Georgia. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism in Azerbaijan reported that the number of 1.567 million tourists visited Georgia in the period of January-August 2014. The number increased by 12 % in comparison to the numbers of the previous year. The first place in the number of tourists visiting Georgia takes the citizens of Turkey (news.az 2013). Correspondingly, there is an increase in the number of visitors of Azerbaijan among Georgian population. According to the statements by Azerbaijani officials, the tourists from Georgia rank the fourth after Russia, Iran and Turkey (trend.az 2011).

Nevertheless, despite the aforementioned programs and steps initiated by the Governments of Azerbaijan and Georgia and various organizations, the Azerbaijani community of Georgia remains alienated from the social and political life of Georgia. The lack of cooperation activities aimed at integration of Azerbaijanis into social and political life impedes the Azerbaijanis socialization processes. The shortage of information on processes taking place in Georgia and lack of knowledge of Georgian language are interconnected root problems underlying the low level of social integration of Azerbaijanis in Georgia. Lack of awareness on political and social issues of the country may cause territorial fragmentation of the country bringing to escalation of protests. The availability of journals and newspapers by the local Azerbaijani media community only in Azerbaijani language hinders the message delivery of issues of concern of Azerbaijanis to Georgian media channels. Closer cooperation is needed between the Azerbaijan and Georgia with the emphasis on integration processes of Azerbaijani community of Georgia.

2.3 Iran

Diplomatic relations between Georgia and Iran marked the beginning in 1992. However, Georgia had centuries-old relations with Iran, being several times seized by Persian Empire. The close connection with Iran throughout the history contributed much to the cultural exchange of Iran with Georgia, which at some point of history even was considered “a part of Greater Iran” (Kornely 2013, p.125).

Currently Iranian actions in Georgia in the religious field encompass wide range of activities. With the assistance and funding from Iran two Shia madrassas were opened Georgia,

one of which is in Marneuli and another in Tbilisi. Three cultural centers were opened in Georgia with the assistance of Iran (rferl.org 2013).

Ahl-UI-Bayt or Ahli Beit according to various resources is considered to be one of the largest and active Muslim religious organization in Georgia (Prasad 2012). Literal translation of “Ahl-UI-Bayt” is people of the house, referring primarily to the family. However, in Islamic terminology it refers to the Prophet Muhammad family (ahl-ul-bayt.org 2015). Officially, this organization claims to be independent, however it has informal ties with Iran. The organization was established in 2001 and is located in Kvemo Kartli region of Georgia. According to the head of the Ahl-UI-Bayt, Rasim Mamedov, approximately 5000 students received religious education in the Ahl-UI-Bayt madrassa since its establishment in 2001. The head of the organization himself, Rasim Mamedov, received religious education in Qom in Iran back in 1990s. The organization primarily targets Azerbaijani population of Georgia aiming to provide them with religious education. The courses taught in the center include religious subject on Quran, courses on Shia theology. Starting from 2003 the center offers courses in English, Georgian languages. In addition, the center is active in organizing events on religious holidays of Muslims. Moreover, the Center publishes a newspaper entitled “Ahl-UI-Bayt” and several books on religious topics were published by the organization. Since its establishment in 2001, the organization actively promotes arrangements for trips of pilgrimage. From 2001 around 500 Georgian Azerbaijanis visited holy Shiite places in Iran, particularly Qom and Mashad (Prasad 2012). Besides the newspaper “Ahl-UI-Bayt” there is a weekly Iranian magazine named Aryana published in Persian. The magazine targets Iranian population of Georgia (McGuinness 2013).

By 2010 the organization gained enough popularity among local Muslim population. In spring 2010 the march was organized to protest against the events in Florida, when a preacher

threatened the burning of Quran. Another march of protest took place in winter 2010 against the banning of hijab in Azerbaijan. Thus, the organization gathered a strong community of followers, being able to gather people in the streets for raising their concerns and voice the organization's vision on these issues (Prasad 2012).

The organization states that, the main source of its funding is received from individuals, Turkish and Iranian religious organizations. However, in his interview to the staff of the Centre for European Minority Issues (ECMI), Elbrus Mamedov, the head of Azerbaijani Cultural Center states that organization has close ties with Iranian Embassy of Tbilisi. Mamedov and other observers as well added that the Officials of Iranian Embassy often visit the organization and give cash money to the organization. However, since money is transferred in cash it becomes difficult to control this issue (Prasad 2012).

Another organization is located in the Ortachala district of Tbilisi. The name of the organization is "Alul Bayt" and it operates in a big house. The house was built in 2009 with the assistance of Iraqi Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. The head of this organization is Faig Nabiev. The house contains the library of Islamic books in different languages, conference room with a capacity to 200 people, internet cafe. The staff of the organization compose five full-time employees and several teachers. The madrassa serves around twenty-five Azerbaijani students from Kvemo Kartli. The courses on religious subjects, computer courses and courses on Georgian language are held four times a week. Both Ahl-ul-Bayt and Alul Bayt organizations carry out their activities free of charge both for Sunni and Shia Muslims. In addition, Alul Bayt organized a number of international conferences dealing with religious issues (Prasad 2012).

Since there is no opportunities to receive high religious education, there is a number of Azerbaijanis leaving for Iran for the religious education purposes. Qom is considered to be the

central destination for receiving high religious education. According to estimates of 2011 around twenty students were studying in Qom. The sources who talked with the students in Qom personally say that almost all of the students aim to come back to Georgia after finishing their studies. They plan to return and work in local mosques of Georgia, or in madrassas working as teachers. Qom is famous as the worldwide major center for Shia scholarship and the level of religious education attained is higher than elsewhere in Georgia it can be received. Taking into consideration these facts it is likely that their return to Georgia may further influence the future of religious practice of Georgian Muslim population in the coming years (Prasad 2012)

The study on the role and the level of influence these religious organizations play across Georgia is of utmost importance. In the interview with the ECMI staff, one government official stated that “Religious schools are being created in Azeri populated areas which do not have official status. Their official aim is to provide religious education, but rather than the promoting true Islam, this is just a screen behind which they hide more political aims. Informal district-level, so called “little schools”, have also been set up, where local youth representatives who studied in Qom gather” (Prasad 2012, p. 7).

According to the head of Cultural Centre of Azerbaijan in Georgia Iranian organizations covert political objectives behind the veil of educational purposes and charity. He states that the main objectives they pursue is the spread of Iranian policies among Muslim population of Georgia. In his interview to the staff of the Centre for European Minority Issues (ECMI), the Deputy Chairman of Geyrat Movement, Qurbanov adds that the Iranian organization Ahl-UI-Bayt mainly uses Iranian books for teaching, promotes the celebration of Shiite religious holidays and organized a celebration in honor of the birthday of Ayatollah Khomeini. According to Qurbanov, it is a promotion of politics, not a religion (Prasad 2012).

Among one of the important steps forward in the relations between Georgia and Iran became an Agreement signed on November 3 2010 on visa-free travel regime, which entered into force on January 26 2011. The Agreement implied the travel for citizens of Georgia and Iran to each other countries for a period of maximum to 45 days without visa. In addition to this, direct flights between Tbilisi and Tehran were resumed in 2010 (Rondeli 2014). Moreover, in November 2010 General Consulate of Iran opened in Batumi (Rondeli 2014; Kirtzkhalia 2010b).

It did not take long to see the results. In comparison with 2010 numbers of visitors from Iran to Georgia composing 21.313 visitors, the numbers in 2011 almost tripled counting to 60.207 visitors. In total, number of visits between Georgia and Iran composed 119.401 in the year of 2011 (Machaidze 2012). In 2012 the number of visits from Iran to Georgia rose up to 89.600 (civil.ge 2013). Visits from Iran to Georgia and to Iran from Georgia made Iran the fourth among the top travel countries of Georgia after first being Turkey, the second Azerbaijan and the third Armenia (Machaidze 2012).

However, starting from July 2 2013 Irakli Vekua, Spokesman of Georgia's Foreign Ministry declared that Georgia unilaterally cancelled the visa-free travel regime with Iran. However, Iran did not revoke visa-free travel regime with Georgia in response to Georgia's cancellation (dfwatch.net 2013). Thus, the travel to Iran for Georgians does not cause much difficulty and the organizations, such as Ahl-Ul-Bayt can actively continue the organization of visits to holy places of Iran.

Another rapid growth in the Georgia-Iranian relations after introduction of visa-free travel regime was visible in the business domain. Although, the Iranian businesses witnessed rapid growth, in total they account solely for 3.3% of the 43,907 newly registered businesses of the 2012 (Rondeli 2014). Iranian activities in Georgia have drawn the attention of the US. The

US was concerned that Iran tries to avoid sanctions. Georgia, in its turn, taking into consideration that the United States is the biggest donor and its key partner in the West suspended visa-free travel regime with Georgia from July 2013 (Rondeli 2014).

To sum up, the unilateral suspension by Georgia the visa-free travel regime with Iran does not have much impact on the activities of Iran and Iranian organizations influencing the religious domain of Muslim communities. Two aforementioned major Iranian religious organizations in Georgia continue to gather a strong community of followers and spread their activities mainly across Azerbaijani population of Georgia. The absence of any control systems over the activities of religious and educational organizations makes it difficult to understand the primary goals of those organizations.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is evident that domestic challenges affect the increase of external influences over the Muslim communities of Georgia visible through the activities from Turkey, Azerbaijan and Iran. The analysis of the activities undertaken by those countries demonstrates their constant involvement in the religious life of Muslim communities of Georgia.

The activities of Turkey primarily target the Muslim population of Ajaria, whereas the activities by Azerbaijan and Iran are directed towards the Azerbaijani community of Georgia.

The activities of Turkey in the Ajaria region cause discontent among the non-Muslim population of the country, fearing of changes in ethnic and religious landscape of the country. The activities of Azerbaijan target the largest ethnic minority of the country, Azerbaijanis, however providing little assistance for activities supporting their integration into Georgian society. The level of integration of Azerbaijani population remains at the poor level. The

language barrier places Azerbaijani population at a disadvantageous position. Underrepresentation in Georgian state system and low degree of socialization are the core problems hindering the integration processes of Azerbaijanis into Georgia's social and political life. In addition, the lack of measures promoting integration further increases the alienation from Georgian society.

The activities of Iranian organizations causes concern among the Azerbaijani organizations' leaders fearing that organizations pursue political goals rather than aim to boost interest toward Islam and preserve religion and culture.

Various Muslim organizations' constant involvement is visible through the increase in number of mosques, madrassas, Islamic educational organizations, the main objective of which lie in boosting the interest towards Islam, religious literature. The issue of concern is that there is no any official data regarding the number of mosques, Islamic educational organizations, and madrassas. Majority of them does not have any legal basis and their activities are not controlled and regulated.

Free dissemination of various journals and magazines on cultural and religious issues takes place in the areas with dense Muslim populations. Year by year the number of students travelling from Georgia to Muslim countries to receive higher religious education increases due to the absence of institutions providing higher religious educations for Muslims of Georgia. On the completion of the studies majority of them return to Georgia working in local mosques and/or madrassas. More and more Muslims of Georgia make pilgrimage to Mecca and visit various places of worship in Muslim countries with the assistance of Muslim organizations functioning in Georgia. All of these facts speak about increase in the level of religiosity of Muslim communities of Georgia.

Thus, it is evident that all of the aforementioned factors undoubtedly speak about an increase in the external influence over the Muslim communities of Georgia. To summarize all of the above-mentioned factors prove the hypothesis of the study, which is the following:

H1: Domestic challenges have an impact on increase of external influences over Muslim communities of Georgia

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