



# Religious Liberalism: Issues of Religious Minorities in Georgia

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I have written this Master's thesis independently. All viewpoints of other authors, literary sources and data from elsewhere used for writing this paper have been referenced.



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## **Religious Liberalism: Issues of Religious Minorities in Georgia**

Logan Hulsey

### **Abstract**

Since 2012, there have been several issues concerning the Georgian Muslim community. These issues include the dismantling of a minaret, the dispute over ruined mosque, and the nailing of a pig's head to a madrassa door. Common causes attributed to these events are the failure of the Central Government to react properly to these issues, the attitudes and rhetoric of the Georgian Orthodox Church, and popular Turkophobia. This research seeks to find the cause of these issues and investigate what they reveal about the democratization process of Georgia. The hypotheses investigated include the roles of the Georgian Central Government, The Georgian Orthodox Church, and popular Turkophobia in instigating these cases. This qualitative research investigates each of the cases of discrimination involving the Georgian Muslim minority originating from Adjara. The cases are analysed in depth through the use of news media and secondary data. To verify the findings and to gain an experienced perspective on the issues, interviews were conducted with experts who have worked with this minority group and other minority issues in Georgia. The theoretical framework of this research involves the concepts of democratization, particularly the concepts of democratic consolidation, majoritarian democracies, liberal/illiberal democracies, state strength, and pluralism. The research findings conclude that all three of the hypotheses are interrelated causes of the cases in question. The findings of the research indicate that the ultimate cause of the cases is Georgia being a weak state that is unable to function without the approval of the Georgian Orthodox church. In addition to this, popular Turkophobia is used as a tool by opponents of the activities of the Georgian Muslim group. It is revealed from the research that Georgia is in the process of democratization, and that it can be labelled as a majoritarian or illiberal democracy, because it lacks the state strength to implement the values of a liberal democracy.

**Keywords:** Religious Minorities, Democratization, Majoritarian Democracy, Liberal Democracy

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## List of Abbreviations

UNM	The United National Movement Party
GD	The Georgian Dream Party
AMAG	The Administration of Muslims of All Georgia
TDI	The Tolerance and Diversity Institute
EMC	The Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center
GYLA	The Georgian Young Lawyers Association
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
GOC	The Georgian Orthodox Church

## Introduction

Prior to the mid-2010s, few people around the world appeared to be aware of Georgia's Muslim minority. About 10 percent of Georgia's population is Muslim, consisting of three different major groups; the Azeri minority in Kvemo Kartli, the Kists of the Pankisi Gorge, and the Muslim minority originating from Adjara<sup>1</sup>. This small population began to attract attention both nationally and internationally after several reported incidents of religious based conflict. Violent protests occurred in response to a minaret being dismantled in the village of Chela, the nailing of a pig's head to the door of a madrassa in the resort town of Kobuleti, and the ongoing fight for a second mosque in the city of Batumi. All three incidents of violence against the Georgian Muslim<sup>2</sup> population since 2012 seemingly occurred out of nowhere. Why religious clashes appear to have increased in the past decade is unclear. One might assume this is due to the worldwide increase in Islamophobia, especially in Georgia, a Christian majority country surrounded by Muslim countries. However, human rights groups such as the Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI) and the Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC) have criticized the central government for their role in these incidents. These groups claim the government is siding with the majority population and is not doing enough to help the Muslim minority. Media coverage of the incidents have tended to be critical of the role of the powerful Georgian Orthodox Church, the religious institution followed by the vast majority of the Georgian population. Right-wing politicians and news media blame the incidents on the increase of Turkish power in Georgia, citing Turkey's desire to assert more influence or even annex Adjara. Observations from this research suggest these incidents of religious conflict began to occur after the power shift in the Georgian Government from Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM) party to Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream (GD) party.

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<sup>1</sup> Adjara has been written in the sources as "Achara", "Adjaria", and "Adjara" due to complications in the Latinization of the Georgian language. In this research, the author choses to use the spelling "Adjara".

<sup>2</sup> This research will use the term "Georgian Muslims" to refer to ethnic Georgians who practice Islam, mostly originating from the region of Adjara. This is not to be confused with Georgia's other Muslim minority groups such as Azeris or Kists.



Prior research done on the issues of the Georgian Muslim minority has focused on issues of their identity. Being members of the dominant ethnic group, but a minority religion has caused a rift in the identity of the Georgian Muslim minority. Additionally, broad research has been conducted in a quantitative manner concerning the rights of minorities in Georgia. There has been little academic research done, however, investigating the causes of the issues surrounding the Georgian Muslim minority. This research seeks to analyze the roles of all of the proposed culprits for the rise in tensions with the Georgian Muslim minority based on what NGO reports, news media, and local Georgians attribute to the rise in tensions with this minority. This research will therefore look at each of these factors in order to understand the cause of the rise in tensions.

The aim of this qualitative research is to explore possible origins of reported intra-religious conflicts and the perceived increase in incidents of discrimination against the Georgian Muslim minority. The incidents in question have been carefully reviewed and the accuracy of media reports verified through interviews with subject experts. Analysis of the research findings in their theoretical and historical context suggest three major factors influence the social environment in Georgia in which intra-religious conflicts may arise: the policies and attitudes of the Georgian Central Government and the Orthodox church, and popular Turkophobia. Effective leadership and consistent application of national policies on human rights are crucial for the young Georgian Government to foster an environment of tolerance and continue on the path to building a liberal democracy.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The premise of this research is that the nation of Georgia remains committed to the process of becoming a liberal democracy, its chosen path upon independence from the Soviet Union. Relevant key concepts and conditions within this framework are defined as democratization, state strength, liberal/illiberal/majoritarian democracies, and pluralism. These concepts are necessary for understanding the situation of Georgia as a new country on the road to democracy, and what the rise in tensions with the Georgian Muslim minority can reveal about Georgia's path to democracy.

### **Democratization**

For the purposes of this research, Georgia is described as undergoing a process of democratization in the form of what John Dryzek and Leslie Holmes calls "Democratic Consolidation" (Dryzek & Holmes, 2002) due to the fact that it became a democracy upon independence from the Soviet Union. Democratization can be understood simply as the process by which a country becomes a democracy. A Democracy is explained by Mucha as "A form of government in which it is recognized that ultimate authority belongs to the people; the people have the right to participate in the decision-making process and to appoint and dismiss those who rule" (Mucha, 2007). This research uses Mucha's definition of Democratization as "a process of transition from an undemocratic (authoritarian, totalitarian) to a more democratic system" (Mucha, 2007). Mucha further explains that the transition is a very simple one, but the difficulty lies in the consolidation of democracy, as it can be very difficult to define the point at which the consolidation stage has been completed. Some say that consolidation is achieved when there are no longer major debates about the rules, but only under them, others are of the opinion that it is achieved when the new system has become "the only game in town" (Dryzek & Holmes, 2002). However, watching the developments in CEE, the opinion that appears most relevant is that "democracy is an ongoing interactive process, rather than some clearly defined end goal" (Mucha, 2007).

## **State Strength**

States around the world vary in strength, or rather their ability to tend to the needs of their citizens. Georgia is one state that has fluctuated greatly in strength in the past few decades. Progress toward a strong democracy is dependent, in large part, upon the strength of the State. Robert Rotberg explains that “Nation-states exist to provide a decentralized method of delivering political (public) goods to persons living within designated parameters (borders)” (Rotberg, 2003). Rotberg Describes Political goods as

those intangible and hard to quantify claims that citizens once made on sovereigns and now make on states. They encompass expectations, conceivably obligations, inform the local political culture, and together give content to the social contract between ruler and ruled that is at the core of regime/government and citizenry interactions (Rotberg, 2003).

Examples of political goods include infrastructure, freedom from violence, and health care.

Rotberg explains that these political goods can be used to measure the strength of a state:

Strong states obviously perform well across these categories [of political goods] and with respect to each, separately. Weak states show a mixed profile, fulfilling expectations in some areas and performing poorly in others. The more poorly weak states perform, criterion by criterion, the weaker they become, and the more that weakness tends to edge toward failure, hence the subcategory of weakness that is termed failing. Many failed states flunk each of the tests outlined above (Rotberg, 2003).

This measure of state strength will be used in this research to define these categories of state strength.

## **Liberal, Illiberal, and Majoritarian Democracies**

Just as there are different degrees of state strength, there are also different degrees by which states are democratic. “Liberal Democracy” is defined by Fareed Zakaria as “a political system marked not only by free and fair elections, but also by the rule of law, a separation of powers, and the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion, and property” (Zakaria, 1997). Liberal Democracy and Democracy have been understood in the west to be synonymous (Zakaria, 1997). Because of this, the values of liberal democracy have been seen as what is expected as the norm. As Christopher Hobson explains

A commonly observed feature of the post-Cold War world has been the ideational dominance of liberal democracy. Indeed, a characteristic aspect of the so-called "Velvet revolutions" that marked the beginning of this period in 1989 was their distinctly anti-utopian nature. No new political economic models were floated, as capitalist liberal democracy was widely accepted as the sole route to "normality". For some these cases reinforced a growing belief that democracy may truly be considered a "universal value," for others democracy had achieved its ascendant position almost by default, reflective more of the failure of alternative (Hobson, 2009).

Georgians are no exception to holding the belief that a consolidated liberal democracy is the state's ultimate goal, along with its fellow post-communist states.

If a liberal democracy is one that upholds liberal values, an illiberal democracy can be understood as one that does not. Zakaria explains that there is a spectrum of illiberal democracies:

Naturally there is a spectrum of illiberal democracy, ranging from modest offenders [...] to near-tyrannies [...], with [other] countries [...] in between. Along much of the spectrum, elections are rarely as free and fair as in the West today, but they do reflect the reality of popular participation in politics and support for those elected (Zakaria, 1997)<sup>3</sup>.

The concept of being an illiberal democracy is closely connected with the concept of democratization as "half of the 'democratizing' countries in the world today are illiberal democracies (Zakaria, 1997). In other words, the state of being an illiberal democracy can be understood as being a transitional step towards becoming a liberal democracy in the process of Democratization.

A majoritarian democracy is a form of an illiberal democracy. Although a majoritarian democracy may sound innocent enough given that democracies elect leaders based on a "majority", Aurel Croissant makes the distinction that "A majoritarian democracy is characterized by the principle of concentrated and unrestricted political power of the majority, whereas a consensus (liberal) democracy is based on the principles of power dispersion and limitation" (Croissant, 2002). Majoritarian democracies do not dilute power, instead they function through acquiring a majority. This runs into issues, however, in a

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<sup>3</sup> This text has been shortened because the examples used by the author in the quote were outdated and are no longer relevant for the quote.

society where there are minority groups. Arend Lijphart explains “the majoritarian model of democracy is inadequate for pluralistic societies because the flexibility necessary for majoritarian democracy is likely to be absent” (Lijphart, 1984). When access to power is permanently denied to minorities, majoritarianism can prove fatal.

“As a consequence of their feelings of exclusion, minorities may withhold support from the regime and thus promote its demise” (Croissant, 2002). Croissant continues by explaining the requirements for a majoritarian democracy to work:

Two important conditions must be satisfied to make majoritarianism compatible with democratic consolidation: first, an alternation in power must occur to avert the emergence of structural minorities; and second, social cleavages and political polarization by way of an exclusion of minority interests from political decision making must not be reinforced by the split between political majorities and minorities (Croissant, 2002).

Georgia is a culturally pluralist society, but does not meet these two conditions. One of the values of a liberal democracy is equality and the protection of human rights. This is difficult to maintain in a majoritarian democracy, and therefore this model of democracy fails in maintaining the values of a liberal democracy in a culturally pluralistic society. It is ideal for a liberal democracy to acclimate itself to its minority situation in order to support its values.

### **Pluralism**

The Oxford Dictionary defines Pluralism as “A condition or system in which two or more states, groups, principles, sources of authority, etc., coexist” (Oxford Dictionary, 2019). Pluralism can be further divided into different categories, for example, political pluralism, cultural pluralism, or religious pluralism. The term “cultural pluralism” is important for this research and is defined as “A form of society in which the members of minority groups maintain their independent cultural traditions” (Oxford Dictionary, 2019). That is, pluralism can be understood as the opposite of majoritarianism. Given that a liberal democracy defends the rights of freedom of speech, religion, and expression, pluralism can be understood as essential to a liberal democracy. A pluralistic society would be what Lijphart calls a “Consensus Democracy” (Lijphart, 1984). “The consensus model [of liberal democracy] stands for governments supported by a broad range of diverse political and social groups. Although the consensus model does not abolish majority rule, it does aim at creating very

broad and oversized political majorities” (Croissant, 2002). A consensus democracy is necessary in a culturally pluralist state such as Georgia to ensure the proper protection of Human rights as well as adequate representation.

## **Background**

### **Overview of Georgian History**

Georgia is located in the South Caucasus along the Black Sea. It is bordered by Russia to its north, Azerbaijan to its east, and Armenia and Turkey to its south. The country is very mountainous, being wedged between the Greater Caucasus mountain range to its north and the Lesser Caucasus Range to its south. It is an aspiring member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union.

### **Pre-Soviet History**

The modern nation of Georgia was formed in its current state under the Russian empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to this, the territory of present Georgia had been occupied by people groups speaking languages derived from the Kartvelian language family. Today, Georgia is known as *Sakartvelo* meaning, “land of the Kartvelians”. Throughout history, these groups were divided into different kingdoms and vassal states that fluctuated between independence, unions, and division through conquest. This has created some historic, linguistic, and religious divisions among Kartvelian speakers that exist today.

The primary characteristic uniting Georgians was their religion. Orthodox Christianity was brought to the country in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD by a Cappadocian missionary, St. Nino. After centuries of being conquered and divided among the Islamic Persian and Ottoman Empires, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the king of Kartli-Kakheti asked to become a protectorate of the Russian Empire, a fellow Orthodox empire. Kartli-Kakheti, and later Imereti were annexed into the Russian Empire, and after the annexation of Adjara in 1878, modern Georgia took its shape. National movements began in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the people of Georgia began to demand more autonomy from Russia. After the February revolution in Russia, Georgia declared its independence from the Russian Empire, forming what is considered the modern state of Georgia.

### **Modern History**

In 1921, the independent state of Georgia was overtaken by Bolshevik forces and became part of the Soviet Union. As with most soviet states, Georgia was a diverse country whose borders were drawn based on the majority population, leaving many minorities within

its borders. Given that Georgia had previously been part of the Russian empire, other ethnic groups from the empire lived in places like Tbilisi and Batumi. This division resulted in a very large portion of Georgia's population consisting of minority groups.

As a Soviet Republic, Georgia went through soviet ethnicity policies wherein the ethnicities of republics were essentially created<sup>4</sup>. This brought all different types of Kartvelian people under the umbrella of "Georgians" with a national dance, national food, language, flag, and so on. Most importantly, this period defined the modern perception of what it means to be a Georgian (De Waal, 2010). Religion was heavily repressed during soviet times. Churches were closed and used as storage, clergy were sent to prison, and atheism was declared as the state religion. No religion was spared from this in any of the Soviet Republics, effecting Christianity, Judaism, and Islam alike.

During the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 80s and early 90s, Georgia was one of the first republics to declare independence after protestors were killed by Soviet troops on April 9, 1989. The country elected Zviad Gamsakhurdia as their new leader, who declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991<sup>5</sup>. Zviad Gamsakhurdia was very much a nationalist leader. He often spoke against the minorities of the country, and his policies gave them little rights (Blauvelt & Berglund, 2016). Gamsakhurdia was ousted in a coup in 1992, plunging the country into civil war. Coup supporters were fighting Gamsakhurdia's supporters in Samgrelo as well as the separatists in Abkhazia, and even the capital was being fought over between the paramilitary forces of the coup leaders. In order for their rule to

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<sup>4</sup> The Soviet Union was portrayed not as a place where ethnic identity had ceased to matter but as a happy union of many discrete ethnonational groups collectively striving to create modern, classless nations that would eventually fuse into a single Soviet people. Over the seventy years of Soviet power, state policy on the nationalities question went through many different phases, at times highlighting the central importance of Russian language and culture, at other times stressing ethnic uniqueness. A constant theme, however, was the paradoxical—or, as Marxists would say, dialectical—union of ethnonational flourishing and cultural assimilation. The former had to do, first and foremost, with how basic questions of territory were decided (King, 2008).

<sup>5</sup>As part of Gorbachev's reforms in the late 80s, non-communist parties were allowed to run for office, resulting in Gamsakhurdia's election as leader of the Georgian SSR.



gain legitimacy and for some stability, the coup leaders invited Eduard Shevardnadze to become president in 1995<sup>6</sup>, restoring the position (Blauvelt & Berglund, 2016).

Shevardnadze was the former communist leader of Georgia during the Soviet Union and a praised negotiator abroad. Shevardnadze was able to bring stability back to the country by ending the fighting and gaining the loyalty of regional leaders (Blauvelt & Berglund, 2016). In the late 90s, Georgia faced many problems. Corruption was rampant, two of its regions were frozen conflicts<sup>7</sup>, and the leader of Adjara did not pay taxes to the central government (George, 2008). People in the country lived in uncertainty and poverty as even electricity was rationed.

As the population became weary of the corruption, crime, and poverty, a new figure arose beginning a movement to end corruption and bring democracy to the country. Mikheil Saakashvili was educated in the United States and was a very pro-democratic, and pro-western figure. In November 2003, after fraudulent elections, he led a series of peaceful protests which led to the storming of parliament and the ousting of Shevardnadze in what was known as the “Rose Revolution”. Saakashvili took power with his main goal being to strengthen the state, end corruption, and make Georgia a “true” democracy. He was largely successful in this endeavor, drastically lowering corruption in the country, putting many corrupt officials and criminals in jail, and implementing many liberal reforms. Saakashvili’s tactics, however, were very harsh. Over time, jails became overcrowded, people lived in fear of speaking out against the government, and Saakashvili had given himself super-presidential powers. In 2012, a new party led by the billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili won the elections, and in the first peaceful transition of power in Georgia’s history, the Georgian Dream party took power, vowing to become more open and democratic than Saakashvili. The Georgian Dream party remains in power to this day.

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<sup>6</sup> Eduard Shevardnadze was already the Speaker of the Parliament; the position of President had been abolished after 1992 and restored in 1995.

<sup>7</sup>This refers to the separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which were active conflicts during the early 90s, but had become frozen conflicts after ceasefire agreements were made during the late 90s.

## **Overview of Adjaran History**

Adjara is an autonomous region in the southwest of the country along the Black Sea and bordering Turkey. It contains the country's second largest city, Batumi. Adjara was part of the Ottoman Empire for centuries, but was populated by ethnic Georgians. Under Ottoman rule, the Georgian population converted to Islam and remained Muslim even after Adjara was reincorporated into Georgia under the Russian empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Pelkmans M. , 2002). As part of the treaty of Kars in 1921 when the borders between Turkey and the Soviet Union were created, Adjara was made into an autonomous republic within the Georgian SSR<sup>8</sup>. After Georgia declared independence from the Soviet Union, Adjara maintained its autonomy (George, 2008). Prior to 2012, there were few issues between the Georgian Orthodox and the Georgian Muslim population. Adjaran Muslims lived in other parts of Georgia as well as Adjara. Many of the Adjaran Muslims converted to Christianity, depleting the population of Adjara practicing Islam greatly (Pelkmans M. , 2002).

## **Pre-Soviet History**

Adjara has a unique history as the Roman Empire settled this area. Followed by the Romans, this area was the borderland of other empires like the Byzantines and the Ottomans. In addition to being coastal, the region is very rugged and mountainous. The population is ethnically Georgian. The region came under Ottoman control in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. During Ottoman rule, while people were not forced to convert to Islam, noble families did so in order to gain prestige and avoid higher taxes. Eventually, the majority of the population had converted to Islam and integrated into Ottoman society (Pelkmans M. , 2002). In 1878, Adjara was ceded to the Russian empire which had already annexed the regions of Imereti and Kartli-Kakheti. During this annexation, many Adjarans fled to Turkey in a process called the "Muhjaroba", fearing poor treatment from a Christian power (Pelkmans M. , 2002). Adjara was united with the rest of Georgia under Russian rule. During this time, the port of

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<sup>8</sup> Largely to placate Turkish concern over the fate of Muslim minorities in the south Caucasus, the Bolshevik government agreed to special treatment for the Muslim areas of Achara and Nakhichevan even before Red Army units had marched into Georgia and Azerbaijan. Under the terms of the treaties of Moscow and Kars in 1921, Soviet Russia and Turkey settled their border in the south Caucasus and agreed on the administrative status of these areas even though they lay inside what would become the Soviet Union (King, 2008).

Batumi became very industrialized (King, 2008) and Adjarans began to become more integrated into Georgian society.

### **Modern History**

Like the rest of Georgia, Adjara experienced a brief time of independence before being incorporated into the Soviet Union. Also like the rest of Georgia, Adjara came under the umbrella of Soviet ethnic policies which labeled them as “Georgians” rather than “Adjarans” (Pelkmans M. , 2006). Under state adopted atheism, Islam was suppressed like Christianity. Being on the border of the Soviet Union and a NATO country, Turkey, Adjara was heavily guarded (Pelkmans M. , 2006). Adjara was given autonomous status as part of the treaty of Kars in order to protect the Muslim population there. This was the only autonomous republic established on the basis of religion in the Soviet Union (King, 2008). After the fall of the Soviet Union, religion which had been confined to the private space, was able to move into the public space in Georgia as it was now embraced. In other words, instead of practicing religion in secret, citizens were now able to express their religiosity publicly. Priests came to Adjara to try and convert the local Georgian Muslim population en masse. The patriarch even came to Batumi and performed a massive baptism of hundreds of participants (Pelkmans M. , 2002). Once the borders were open between Adjara and Turkey, Turkish citizens, many of whom were descended from Adjarans that fled during the Russian empire, began to send aid to Islamic institutions in Adjara, sending funding for mosques, religious literature, and giving education to religious leaders (Pelkmans M. , 2002).

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Autonomous Republic of Adjara was ruled by Aslan Abashidze. Abashidze consolidated his power and became an authoritarian. While Adjara did not fully separate from the rest of Georgia, Abashidze ruled the Autonomous Republic without the interference from the central government. He did not pay taxes and ruled with impunity (George, 2008). Adjara became a hotbed of crime, corruption, and smuggling. After the Rose Revolution, one of Saakashvili’s first moves was to reincorporate Adjara and oust Abashidze. Tensions increased between the two leaders and at the same time, Adjarans themselves began protesting Abashidze’s rule. Sensing his end, Abashidze fled to Moscow and Adjara was reincorporated into the rule of the central government (De

Waal, 2010). Saakashvili then transformed Batumi into an international port city and tourist destination. He invited foreign investors into Adjara and the city began to rapidly change. Skyscrapers arose almost overnight, as did casinos and luxury hotels. More and more tourists came to the city and the city entered an economic boom (Zviadadze, 2019). Most of the influx of tourists and business owners came from Turkey, as well as Azerbaijan, and Russia. This rapid economic growth, however, created a large inequality gap, which locals came to blame the foreign entrepreneurs (Zviadadze, 2019). Today Adjara is still an autonomous republic within Georgia and Batumi remains Georgia's second largest city.

Another important aspect of Adjara is that of its people and their identity. Now that Adjara was freed from, the yoke of state-imposed atheism, the people were free to practice their religion. Given that the Georgian Orthodox church was one of the major symbols of the Georgian nation, the power of the church began to flourish after independence. The church began to acquire property taken by the Soviets, the clergy gained influence in politics, and people were allowed to attend mass without fear of persecution (Tolerance and Diversity Institute, 2014). Just as Christians were free to practice their religion, so too were the Muslims of Adjara. Adjara was finally able to open communication with Turkey, where Imams could receive religious training, Islamic literature could be imported, and Muslim scholars could study. Many Turkish citizens, most of Adjaran descent, began sending aid to Adjara in order to help Islam grow (Pelkmans M. , 2006). This was met with controversy, however, as many Georgian Christians were not happy about Georgians practicing Islam. This especially angered the church, which believed that Adjaran Muslims needed to "return to their ancestors' religion". This created an identity struggle among many Adjarans which is talked about in Mathijs Pelkmans book *Defending the Border: Identity, Religion, and Modernity in Georgia* (Pelkmans M. , 2006). Some Adjarans heeded this rhetoric and converted to Christianity, while others stood firm in their Muslim beliefs. This is an identity issue with which Adjarans continue to struggle (Zviadadze, 2019).

## Methodology

The question of my research is “Why is there a conflict between Georgian Christians and Muslims?” This research will be divided into three interrelated hypotheses that may be responsible for the conditions conducive to intra-religious conflicts Georgian Muslims and Orthodox Christians:

1. The majoritarian nature of Georgian Democracy.
2. The position of the Georgian Orthodox Church on Islam in Georgia.
3. Popular Turkophobia, or the general fear of increasing Turkish influence in Adjara. (move over Adjara to line up under Popular)

These hypotheses were chosen during the preliminary research. These three causes are frequently attributed to the cause of the issue with the Georgian Muslim minority from previous research, media, and conversations with local Georgians. They will therefore be tested simultaneously during the research.

Although there have been conflicts between Georgian Christians and other minority religious groups, this research is restricted to conflicts with the Georgian Muslim group originating from Adjara. This narrower focus permits an in-depth exploration of religious differences, avoiding extraneous differences in language and ethnicity found, for example, with the Azeri minority. This research also focuses on Georgian Muslims rather than Jehovah’s Witnesses, Catholics, or other minority religious groups as conflicts with the Georgian Muslim group have been more common and more prominent.

“Georgian Christians” refers to Georgians following the Georgian Orthodox Church, the dominant religious group in the country consisting of about 80% of the population. The “conflict” between these groups refers to the phenomenon of the increase in seemingly discriminatory cases involving this minority group since 2012. These issues include difficulties of the Georgian Muslims to build a mosque, clashes with the police over the dismantling of a minaret, the nailing of a pig’s head to the door of a madrassa, and several other issues. Finally, this research is intended to stimulate discussion of the ultimate questions

of the implications of these conflicts for Georgian society as a whole, and what they reveal about Georgia's democratization process.

The "issue" refers to the situation that the Georgian Muslim community finds themselves in when they try to bring an expression of their beliefs into the public space through building a mosque, a cemetery, or some other expression of their faith<sup>9</sup>. In order to test the hypotheses, six cases of conflict were examined in detail. These cases included those occurring in Nigvziani, Chela, Mokhe, Kobuleti, Batumi, and Adigeni. Data gathered on these cases came from news media and secondary data from NGOs and public reports. The data of these cases were compiled into detailed descriptions of these cases.

Each of these cases are analyzed for characteristic patterns, which were verified by interviews with experts in this situation and could give unique insight based on experience and perspective. The interviews were conducted in order to verify my finding through comparing them with previous experts' research and to gain insight on the situation from the perspective of experts who have been working with minorities in Georgia for several years. Persons interviewed included Tatia Kalitoshvili - a faculty member at Ilia State University who has done anthropological research in Adjara (Appendix C); Eka Chitanava - the head of the Tolerance and Diversity Institute (Appendix A); Marina Elbakidze - a program head at the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy, and Development (Appendix B); and Sophie Zviadadze - a professor at Ilia State university who has done research on the Georgian Muslim minority of Adjara (Appendix D). All interviews were conducted in English and covered various topics relating to answering the research question. The interviews were semi-structured and covered topics including the research question, the interviewees' particular area of expertise, and the interviewees' particular opinion about the issue of the Georgian Muslims and how it can be solved.

The limitations of this study are language and time. English is my native language. As my Georgian does not extend beyond a novice level, I am unable to conduct on-site field research and in-person interviews in Adjara or any of the villages where the case took place.

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<sup>9</sup> The "Situation" of the Georgian Muslims will be the term used to refer to the overall issue religious based discrimination against this minority in Georgia.

The language barrier restricted written materials to English sources. Additional time would also have been helpful, as the research involved exploring details of six different cases, each of which could have been approached as individual case studies.

## Descriptions of Cases

The following cases were carefully compiled into comprehensive descriptions using several different sources of data. The descriptions were made in a comprehensive way and follow facts that were present in multiple data sources in order to maintain validity. The following cases happened in separate villages and cities throughout Georgia and each case will be titled with the name of the village or city in which they occurred.

### **Nigvziani**

Nigvziani is a small village in the region of Guria<sup>10</sup>, which borders Adjara to the north. During the 1980s, residents of Adjara were moved here as eco-migrants along with people from other regions of Georgia. This was due to the high risk of landslides in the highland regions (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2012). Before 2012, there was no mosque in this village and the local Muslim population had to go to Kobuleti to pray. To alleviate this commute, the local community purchased a house to be used as a place of worship (Georgia Today, 2012). On October 25, 2012, tensions rose in the village Muslim residents marched through the village to the prayer house on the evening of an Islamic holiday. Christian residents blocked the road to the house and tried to stop Muslim residents from praying there, threatening bloodshed if their actions continued (Georgian Journal, 2012). Allegedly, there were people coming from other villages to this prayer house for the celebration of Eid al-adha<sup>11</sup> and this was interpreted by the Christian residents to be a demonstration (Vestnik Kavkaza, 2012). Additionally, a rumor had spread that purchase of the house was being funded with Turkish money, which caused the local Christian population to react. According to a local Muslim, “A Turkish citizen purchased a house and then sold it to a Georgian citizen because he could not use it. We opened a temple there. Anyone claiming that we did not have enough funds to buy the house is not correct. We collected the money and bought everything with our own money” (humanrights.ge, 2012). This rumor resulted in a standoff between the local Muslim community and Christian community on November 2, as local Christians again

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<sup>10</sup> The dominant group in Guria is Georgian Orthodox, and Adjarans that were moved here during the 1980s were placed in villages that mixed with Orthodox Georgians.

<sup>11</sup> Eid al-adha is the Muslim celebration of sacrifice. It celebrates the culmination of the pilgrimage to Mecca. It is a three-day celebration wherein animals are sacrificed and their flesh distributed throughout the community and is a time for visiting friends and family (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019).



blocked the road, preventing Georgia's chief Mufti<sup>12</sup>, Jemal Paksadze from entering the village (ecoi.net, 2013). Escalating tensions caused opposition and NGOs to call on the government to launch an investigation into the situation.

Stating its new strategy for religious disputes, the government stepped aside and gave responsibility over the situation to representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church and Muslim leaders. On November 5, the Minister of Justice, Tea Tsulukiani, elaborated on this stating "When there is a conflict between the different religions, the state must provide a chance for them to solve the problem themselves rather than interfering directly...if there are reports of abuse, beatings or other violations of human rights, then the prosecutor's office will launch the investigation process and get involved" (Georgia Today, 2012). Tsulukiani explained that this new strategy was in response to the heavy-handed response by the previous government. On November 7<sup>th</sup>, church members met with local Muslim leaders and agreed that the house would not become a mosque and that people from other villages would not be permitted to attend services there. This agreement was in exchange for permission to operate the house as a place of worship (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2012). Quotes from locals interviewed reiterate the good relations that the two communities have and that "outside forces" were responsible for escalating the situation, possibly opposition candidates or agents from Turkey (humanrights.ge, 2012).

### **Chela**

Chela is a village in the Adigeni district of the Samtskhe-Javakheti region. Its population consists of eco-migrants from Adjara and Racha, who were moved to this region from their highland regions due to a high risk of landslides. Those from Adjara are primarily Muslim, while those from Racha are Georgian Orthodox Christians. In 2008, the Muslim population converted a house into a mosque under protests by members of the clergy from the nearby monastery of Zarzma. A group of about 150 people gathered to try and destroy the mosque, but this failed (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2013). The mosque was registered as a house and had no minaret. In 2012, members of the mosque decided that a

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<sup>12</sup> A Mufti is "A Muslim legal expert who is empowered to give rulings on religious matters" (Oxford Dictionary, 2019).

minaret should be added. Money was gathered by the Muslim community and a minaret was ordered from a company in Turkey (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2015). On July 14, 2013, the minaret arrived at the Georgian border with Turkey. No importation issues were anticipated. A group of four Muslims from the local community went to the border to pick it up (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2013). The representatives, however, were admittedly unfamiliar with the importation process. “We came with the documents. They indicated which cabin we should go to. We were not experienced with this process and didn’t know what to do, but listened to what they told us...Customs clearance finished without any problem, and at about 14:00 on July 14, we moved to Adigeni and arrived in Chela at 12:00 at night” (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2013).

As the Minaret was being assembled, the local clergy from nearby Zarzma circulated a petition, gaining over 500 signatures, for the removal of the minaret (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2013). The revenue service notified the Muslim community that they must produce the proper paperwork for the materials used in the minaret. On August 26, 2013, residents awoke to find the minaret being dismantled. It is alleged that the revenue service began the removal before the 30-day timeframe that was given to the Muslim community (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2013). The revenue service stated that there was doubt about the proper declaration of materials on the customs form, resulting in a reduction of taxes. They claim that the minaret was to be dismantled for inspection and it would then be reinstalled at no further cost to the community (Ivanishvili, 2013). As the minaret was being dismantled, the local Muslim community began to protest the dismantling, but were blocked on the bridge leading to the mosque by the police (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2013). Eventually the protesters clashed with the police. Twenty-one people were detained and taken to the police station in Akhaltsikhe, the regional center. Multiple accounts by Muslim protestors were that they were physically and verbally abused by police (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2013). The arrest of protestors caused protests in front of the police station between August 26th and 27th, eventually the detainees were released with three being given criminal charges that were later dropped (The Jamestown Foundation, 2013). Then PM Bidzina Ivanishvili paid for the release of the minaret from revenue service custody with his own money. He then called upon leaders from the Muslim and Christian communities to

settle the dispute. Members of the Muslims community who were involved in the construction were fined for illegal construction (The Messenger , 2013).

On August 29<sup>th</sup>, the Patriarch of Georgia Ilia II met with Muslim leaders in Georgia and discussed the Chela incident with them. After the meeting, representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church and Georgia's Muslim community made a joint statement and announced that in the interests of both sides, the minaret will be stored in neutral territory in the village of Chela<sup>13</sup>. The Patriarchate asked the government to reconsider its legislation on the construction of religious buildings. The minaret would remain stored until the legal matter is resolved (The Messenger , 2013). The results of this decision caused protests on August 31 by Muslim sympathizers in Batumi who were angry that the minaret was not immediately reconstructed as promised by the revenue service (Democracy & Freedom Watch , 2013). “When we were rallying in Batumi demanding to restore the minaret, the Patriarchate decided to seal the minaret, summoning Jemal Paksadze<sup>14</sup> to sign this document. Afterwards, the priest in Zarzma stated that he is a guarantee that the minaret won’t be installed in Chela ever” (Democracy & Freedom Watch , 2013). Protests also occurred in the municipal capital of Adigeni, where Christian protestors demanded a national referendum about whether or not there should be minarets in Georgia at all (REFworld, 2013). When the minaret was being returned to Chela, Christians protested by blocking the road returning to the village. “When we asked the protesters why they wanted the minaret to be taken away, they said that it was installed by Turkey with ‘broadcasting equipment’ inside it. They said it was the way for us [Georgian Muslims] to conduct clandestine communications with Turkey” (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2016). The issue became highly controversial and heavily covered in the media. Official statements were released by the Patriarch as well as Ivanishvili.

The Patriarch’s official statement blamed the escalation on unnamed outside forces and called on Muslim leaders to bring calm to their followers. He further stated the importance of laws so that religious minorities would know the limit of their actions, stating that “The purpose of this effort is to somehow cause a clash between the Christian and

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<sup>13</sup> This was a field 2km away from the boundaries of Chela (Democracy & Freedom Watch , 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Jemal Paksadze was the head mufti of AMAG during this time (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2013).

Muslim populations, to discredit the Church and the state by this and to realize their goals against this backdrop” (Pravoslavie.ru, 2013). The church then called upon Muslim leaders to control their constituents:

We address the Muslim spiritual leaders who are living in Georgia with the request not only not to encourage these provocative actions, but also to oppose them in Adigeni as well as in other parts of Georgia. Today it all depends on you: the position of your flock regarding the law, the state interests and, of course, defense of religions (Pravoslavie.ru, 2013).

Finally, the church reiterated the good relations between the two religious communities and called for the passing of legislation on religious issues.

On our part, we have always striven and will not relax our efforts to strengthen these kind relations that we have not only with the Muslim leaders and the Muslim population in Georgia, but also with our neighboring Muslim countries and their spiritual leaders. And we consider that one requirement for this is an urgent investigation of the real reasons for these cases, identification of those persons who committed the unlawful actions, and who are interested in aggravating cases. At the same time an appropriate legislative base should be created, so that all would know the limits of their actions, so there will be no escalation of religious confrontation (Pravoslavie.ru, 2013).

In essence, the church calls upon the government to put in place unspecified legislation in order to punished unspecified people who are aggravating the situation.

Ivanishvili’s official press statement praised the history of religious tolerance in Georgia and reaffirmed the government’s stance on the freedom of worship. He explained that the minaret’s disassembly was in order to verify the proper customs declarations. He further pointed out that “Violations of the law occurred during the construction of the minaret, and the government cannot turn a blind eye to willfulness and unlawfulness” (Ivanishvili, 2013). He then reiterated his stance on religious issues by saying “When it comes to religious beliefs, the government must exercise extreme caution, as this is the most sensitive matter for adherents of any religion. Harmony and peace between religions has no alternative in our country” (Ivanishvili, 2013). On September 4, however, Ivanishvili stated that “You can’t behave like that, you come out of your house and there's a minaret there, with no prior agreement, no design plans, and the local authorities haven't been informed” (REFworld, 2013). In this way, he puts the blame on the Georgian Muslim community for the events.

In response, several NGOs released a joint statement criticizing the way that the situation was handled by Ivanishvili's government. "We believe matters could have been resolved without dismantling the minaret. Yet the revenue service opted for the crudest, most unacceptable of tactics" (REFworld, 2013). Tamta Mikeladze of the Centre for Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC), also blamed the government for "using force against people in a negative way, taking a decision of questionable legality and proportionality, and offending people's religious sensibilities" (REFworld, 2013). Others placed some of the blame on the Georgian Orthodox Church. The head of the center for Tolerance explains<sup>15</sup>:

Representatives of the Patriarchate constantly refer to Muslims and also people of other faiths as enemies of the country and such like [...] In 1992 and 1993, the Patriarchate stated that any Georgian who betrays Orthodoxy is an enemy of country and church. That discourse continues even now. The Patriarchate called for calm, but it has pointedly directed its remarks at Muslims, not its own adherents (REFworld, 2013).

Other members of the church stated clear views against the construction of a minaret. One church member stated:

The village of Chela is a place where Georgians shed their blood in the fight for their Orthodox faith for centuries. The construction of a minaret in this historical village is insulting to us. It's Turkish expansion, it's an order from the European Union (Interfax-Religion, 2013).

On November 28, 2013, the Muslim community was given an official permit to construct the minaret. Construction began immediately that evening under police supervision. Priests allegedly arrived the next morning to protest, but nothing more happened beyond this (Agenda.ge, 2013).

## **Batumi**

Batumi is the capital of the autonomous republic of Adjara. As of today, Batumi only has one mosque, *Orta Jami*. The economy of Batumi has grown in the past two decades. Because of this, there is an influx of Georgian Muslims from the mountainous regions of Adjara into Batumi (JAM news, 2017). While talks of constructing a second mosque in

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<sup>15</sup> The Center for Tolerance is branch of the Georgian Ombudsman's office (REFworld, 2013).

Batumi have been happening for a long time, the problem became more urgent as more and more Georgian Muslims moved into the city. The Orta Jami mosque became so overcrowded that Muslims were forced to pray in the street outside of Orta Jami (EMC, 2016).

In 2009, a deal had been struck between Georgia and Turkey wherein Turkey would help finance the restoration of mosques on Georgian territory and in return Turkey would reconstruct Georgian Orthodox sites on Turkish territory (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2012). This deal was widely unpopular and little information about it was transparent to the public. It was speculated that the deal included restoration of a second mosque in Batumi that had been destroyed by the Soviet Union, the Sultan Azizye<sup>16</sup> mosque which fueled anti-Turkish sentiment. This is elaborated in a report by OC Media:

In the eyes of many opponents to the mosque, Turkey is seen as an imperial power aiming to restore control over Adjara, if not politically, then by means of expanded business ties, promotion of Turkish culture, and weakening of Christian influences to facilitate the expansion of Islam. However, the Adjara Muslims community has repeatedly denied that they want to construct a mosque on this location, especially considering the space has already been used (OC Media, 2017).

This controversy caused outcry in Batumi, particularly from the Georgian Orthodox Church, which has remained steadfast in their opposition to the construction of a second mosque. Although the Patriarchate has never made an official statement on the issue, the local clergy in Batumi have repeatedly led rallies against the plan (OC Media, 2017).

Several political candidates had promised the Georgian Muslims that they would see to it that a second mosque was built; Ivanishvili himself made this promise multiple times during his campaign (TDI, 2016). In 2014, the Georgian Muslim community decided that enough was enough and officially appealed to the government, demanding the construction of a second mosque. “In October 2014 the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia<sup>17</sup>(AMAG) wrote to the Prime Minister asking for the existing Mosque to be enlarged and

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<sup>16</sup> The reconstruction of the Sultan Azizye mosque was controversial because it was seen as a symbol of Turkish imperialism. The mosque was built by Sultan Aziz of the Ottoman Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to be used by the Ottoman military garrison in Batumi (Humanrights.ge, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> There is a lack of consistency among the sources as to the proper translation of this organization from Georgian to English. The author has chosen to use the translation “The Administration of Muslims of All Georgia” in order to be consistent with the commonly used acronym “AMAG”.

restored, instead of building a new one. The document was signed by 23 persons” (ecoi.net, 2015). This would not have worked out however, because the Orta Jami mosque is a protected heritage site and expansion would have destroyed this heritage.

In 2014, the State Agency on Religious Affairs, stated that the Georgian Muslim community didn’t want to construct a second mosque, but instead wanted a new residence for the mufti as well as a madrasa. This is despite the fact that “the Muslim community has made it clear that they need a second mosque, and it has become impossible for everyone to fit in the Orta Mosque and the streets surrounding it” (OC Media, 2017). In January 2015, the State Agency of religious affairs with the cooperation of AMAG announced that the existing Batumi mosque would be enlarged to include a madrasa and offices for a Mufti and his staff. These were officially opened on October 5, 2015 (ecoi.net, 2015). This outcome angered many in the Georgian Muslim community.

Two Georgian Muslims in Batumi, explained in an interview: "We are praying outside, sometimes in the rain and snow. AMAG did not consider the needs of the Muslim community." (ecoi.net, 2015). Another Batumi Muslim confirmed this. "There is a big Muslim population. We need proper conditions to pray." (ecoi.net, 2015). Frustrated, an initiative group was formed among the Georgian Muslim community for the construction of a mosque entirely purchased and built by the Georgian Muslim community (OC media, 2018).

In April of the preceding year, a controversial news report had been aired on the Rustavi 2 news network, where the reporter, attempting to show that a second mosque is unnecessary in Batumi, showed an empty mosque in the Khulo district to prove that the existing mosques are unused. He further interviewed a very ill-informed history professor who claimed that this second mosque issue was being imposed on Georgia by Turkey and it was a form of encroaching Turkish power. This was condemned by several NGOs for presenting misinformation and violating several broadcasting laws. Rustavi 2 apologized and removed the broadcast (notophobia, 2015). By late 2016, the initiative group had gathered over 12,000 signatures on a petition for a new mosque; and on September 7<sup>th</sup> purchased a plot of land for the new mosque. After appealing to the city council for a permit for the

mosque, a formal denial was given by the city on May 5, 2017 stating that the mosque could not be built because the land was in a residential area (EMC, 2017). This ruling was considered discriminatory by several NGOs who pointed out the multiple churches in the area (Chitanava, 2019). The Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC) noted that:

In accordance with the regulations concerning the territory of Batumi municipality itself, in zone 6, apart from residential buildings, the construction of various objects of public purpose is also permitted, including “religious objects” for which, acquiring special (zonal) agreement is required from Batumi Municipality City Hall” (EMC, 2017).

The Georgian Muslim community constructed a makeshift structure covered by a tarp and declared the site “open for worship” on May 26<sup>th</sup> (JAM news, 2017). In June 2017, with the help of the EMC and other NGOs, the Georgian Muslim community officially appealed the rejection and the matter was taken to court (OC media, 2018). In April 2018, the government offered permission for the construction of the mosque under the condition that the land was given to AMAG. Given the mistrust of the Georgian Muslim community in this organization and the belief that this was simply a means to freeze the issue, this deal was declined (OC media, 2018). In April of 2019, over a year after the rejection for construction was appealed, the court case officially began (OC Media, 2019). Despite generating a great amount of media attention and stimulating an enormous controversy among Georgian society for several years, the Mosque issue remains unresolved.

## **Mokhe**

Mokhe is a small village in the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti in the municipality of Adigeni. The residents of this village are eco-migrants from Adjara who, along with Christians from Racha, were moved there in the 1980s because of the risk of landslides (Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 2014). In 2014, a dispute emerged surrounding the ownership of a ruined building in the town. The ruins were the roofless foundation of what was claimed to be either a mosque or a church. According to a member of the Georgian Patriarchy, the site was a Georgian church in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but was then converted into a



mosque by the Ottomans (Civil.ge, 2014)<sup>18</sup>. According to the Muslim residents of Mokhe, the building was a mosque, built by Meskhetians between 1927 and 1934. The building fell out of use when the Meskhetians were deported to Central Asia in the 1940s. The TDI interviewed a man from the village who confirms that the ruins were a mosque:

A 74 year- old village elder retells his father's account that his family used to go to the Mosque of Mokhe every Sunday from a remote Kikibo village, since it was the only mosque nearby. [The elderly man] also remembers that his grandfather sold a cow to donate for construction of the mosque. According to the local Muslims, this site had been functioning as a mosque until mass exile of the [Meskhetian Turks] was ordered by Stalin in the 1940s (TDI, 2014).

Since 1957, the building was simply registered as a clubhouse until it was transferred to the Adigeni municipality in 2007 (TDI, 2014). In May of 2014, the local Muslim community asked the local government to transfer the building to them. Their request was postponed due to the elections. On July 8, the Muslim community received a letter from the municipality head saying that as state property, the building could only be used for public needs (TDI, 2014). Resentment was especially high as when they were visited by Samtskhe-Javakheti's governor together with Zakaria Endeladze, campaigning to be head of Adigeni district, and the chief mufti of Georgia respectively, they were promised the building. It never happened. After Endeladze was elected, he announced that the mosque's present status as a cultural center could not be changed (Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 2014).

On July 10, 2014, construction workers arrived at the building to begin demolition, but they were forced to leave because of protests by the local Muslim community, which, in turn, sparked a counter protest by the local Christian community (OC Media, 2017). The construction workers returned to the site on October 22, 2014 accompanied by police, prompting a protest by the local Muslim community, which resulted in a clash with the police. Fourteen protestors were arrested resulting in three being released and 11 being charged a 250 lari penalty, which is being contested by 10 of them (TDI, 2014). A 2015 report by

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<sup>18</sup> This has not been proven to be true.

Georgia's Public Defender<sup>19</sup> said that local Muslims complained about verbal and physical abuse from the police, who called them "Tatars", a slur for Muslims. The report confirms that the protesters had signs of physical violence used against them. No official investigation into the case was opened. (OC Media, 2017). The association of Georgian Young Lawyers (GYLA) issued a statement saying:

According to the witnesses, the police used physical force against detainees and made insulting remarks. Also, as the witnesses declared several detainees were severely beaten by the police. Among them was a woman, who received serious injuries on her face. According to local Muslims, the group of detainees also included young people, who intended to record the police action by their phone cameras, but their cameras were confiscated and destroyed (Civil.ge, 2014).

This excessive response by the police and the government was highly criticized by human rights groups.

After the confrontation, the State Agency of religious Affairs created a special commission to settle the dispute. The commission consisted of four representatives of the Georgian Muslim community, three from the patriarchy, two from the local government, two from the cultural heritage protection agency, and one from the Agency of Religious Affairs. The local Muslim community strongly protested the composition of the commission as none of the three individuals they put forward to represent them were selected (OC Media, 2018). The goal of the commission was to determine whether the site was in fact a mosque or a church, using a team of archaeologists.

The commission required almost three years to reach a verdict on the ruins, during which local Muslims began praying inside the ruins until 2016, when access was sealed off, prompting the Muslims to pray next to the ruins (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2016). In May 2017, the archaeologists determined that it was inconclusive as to which religion the ruins belonged. Based on these findings, the government decided that the ruins would not be

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<sup>19</sup> The Public Defender (Ombudsman) of Georgia oversees the observance of human rights and freedoms in Georgia. It advises the government on human rights issues. It also analyses the state's laws, policies and practices, in compliance with the international standards, and provides relevant recommendations (ENNHRI, 2017).

transferred to either the local Muslims or local Christians. The government then offered to build a separate mosque in the village, under the supervision of AMAG, while the site would be considered a disputed building under the supervision of the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Preservation (TDI, 2018).

Mokhe's Muslim community has refused the offer and continues to hold prayers in front of the old ruins. They have expressed dissatisfaction with the commission's decision, believing it was an attempt to silence them (OC Media, 2017). Nevertheless, construction on the new mosque began under the supervision of AMAG. Throughout the construction, between 2017 and 2018, the Tolerance and Diversity Institute filed several lawsuits against AMAG for not releasing details about the construction of the new mosque. It was revealed:

On January 12, 2018 Akhaltsikhe District Court pronounced its judgment: sustained TDI's request and ordered Adigeni City Hall to send information about the new Mosque to TDI. Accordingly, the City Hall has to officially notify TDI that the construction permit for building a new mosque in Mokhe has never been issued (TDI, 2018).

This could lead to potential legal issues in the future. The local Muslims remain adamant and continue to pray next to the ruins. In 2018, when the local Muslims continued to pray next to the blocked off ruins, the imam leading these prayers was dismissed by AMAG (OC Media, 2018).

### **Kobuleti**

Kobuleti is a resort town just north of Batumi in the region of Adjara. Tensions arose in mid- to late 2014 between the Christian and Muslim community. A building, owned by Mustafa Buyuk, a Turkish citizen, was being rented by the leader of the organization known as "Relations of Georgian Muslims". Due to the overcrowding of the local madrassa<sup>20</sup>, of about 19 students, the house was to be converted into a second madrassa (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2014). The local Christian population protested this by constructing a barricade around the building, and guarded the building, preventing people from entering the

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<sup>20</sup> A madrassa is "a Muslim school, college, or university that is often part of a mosque" (Merriam-Webster, 2019).

premises (Human Rights House, 2014). Local Christians were skeptical about the intent of opening a Muslim boarding school on a street inhabited by a majority of Orthodox families. They perceived the move as part of the “creeping Turkish expansion.” Protestors that were interviewed claim a Turkish citizen paid 250,000 US dollars for the property and initially planned to open a hotel there (eurasianet, 2014). Locals say this fact should be taken into consideration. A local Christian stated:

You can purchase property in the prestigious districts of Batumi for 250, 000 -300, 000 [US dollars]. Why did he buy a property in the narrow street of Kobuleti then, which is mostly inhabited by orthodox people? As an Orthodox person I protest it and believe the boarding school must not be opened here. They bring literature from Turkey but we do not know what kind of literature it is. It is impossible to control it because everything is closed and request the Ministry of Education to get interested in this fact. I hope Orthodox government of Georgia will assist us. Representatives of municipal board and government met [with] us and promised to help. I personally trust the God and nothing will happen without God’s Will (Human Rights House, 2014).

Protestors claim that the neighborhood is majority Christian and that this madrassa would become a hub of Islamic conversion for impoverished families in the region. Locals claimed that the intention of the madrassa was to expand the Muslim population. Another local taking part in the volunteer Christian neighborhood patrol, describes prevailing thought on how Islamic boarding schools recruit students among poor Georgian families. According to him, these children are promised free secondary education and even free university education in Turkey. “And this is what attracts these families. Not everyone has money for their children’s education. But no real Christian will sacrifice their children’s faith for education. No, they better be uneducated, work the land, but stay Christians” (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2014).

Tensions reached a peak in September 2014 when local Christian protestors harassed workers who were sent to work on the building, shouting insults and throwing rocks. The head of Relations of Georgian Muslims explains:

During the construction of a boarding school in summer, a certain group of locals constantly harassed them by preventing entry into the construction site or verbally insulting them. They complained to police, but the police didn’t react and said that there were no signs of crime in their actions (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2014).

On September 10<sup>th</sup>, protestors slaughtered a pig on the grounds and nailed its head to the door; an insult, as pork is considered unholy in Islam. The three perpetrators were found and charged with “petty hooliganism”, resulting in a fine of 100 lari each - about 35 US dollars. Allegedly one of the perpetrators was part of a local youth organization<sup>21</sup> connected to Georgian Dream, the ruling party (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2014). Human rights NGOs condemned this incident and stated that these individuals should be charged under Georgian Criminal code 156, which states people cannot be persecuted for exercising the right to free speech (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2014). NGOs also pointed out the lack of intervention by the local authorities in this situation. Action was taken only after the pig’s head was nailed to the madrassa door.

Even then, protests did not subside. Locals continued to maintain a makeshift barrier in front of the madrassa, which has yet to be opened. This barrier is decorated with banners and Orthodox Christian religious icons. Only one individual lives there, a local law student from Batumi (Humanrights.ge, 2015). The public defender’s office accused the local authorities of discrimination on three separate occasions (OC Media, 2018). The most recent of these was in October of 2018, when the Georgian court ordered water be supplied to the facility, which remained unopened. In response to this, the local authorities stated that they have tried several times to supply water to the building, but were stopped by locals (OC Media, 2018). This provision of water remains unsolved at the time of writing. Negotiations between religious leaders from the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Georgian Muslim community have been attempted, but have so far been unsuccessful (Transparency International, 2014). The PM at the time released a letter about the incident praising Georgia’s multiculturalism and blaming “outside forces” for the escalation in tensions (Humanrights.ge, 2015). Human Rights NGOs were particularly vocal about the incident, with several of them releasing a joint letter in which they blame the government for a lack of action. Among the accusations, they include: not treating the pig’s head incident as discrimination, not doing more to open the school, being loyal to the dominant group instead of protecting the minority, a lack of police presence, non-transparent negotiations, and no

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<sup>21</sup> The name of this organization is not given by the source.

removal of the makeshift barriers (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2014). Finally, the church, while it condemned the pig's head incident as Islamophobic, stated that the madrassa should not be opened because of it being against the will of the local people (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2014).

### **Adigeni**

Adigeni is the main town of the municipality with the same name in the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti<sup>22</sup>. As with several towns and villages in the district, many of its residents are eco-migrants who were moved from both highland Adjara and Racha in the 1980s due to a risk of landslides. Issues in this religiously diverse community began in 2015, when a man named Revaz Mikeladze, a local Muslim, died. His relatives wanted to bury his body in a spot in the town other than the local Christian cemetery. The local community authorities refused permission, and he was buried in the nearby town of Zanavi. The issue was that Christian cemeteries in Georgia violate multiple Islamic traditions; several crosses are on the site, images of the deceased, and the community frequently brings alcohol onto the premises as part of Georgian Orthodox tradition<sup>23</sup>.

Revaz Mikeladze's death sparked a debate among the local Muslim community about creating a separate cemetery in Adigeni after Mikeladze's family proposed a suitable plot in the village (JAM News, 2016). The proposal for a separate Muslim cemetery upset the local Christian community. They saw no need for one. Tensions reached a peak on February 29, 2016, when a verbal confrontation began about the issue between local Muslims and local Christians. In response to this, the municipality head came to the town that evening to meet with the local Muslim community in the street (Civil.ge, 2016). During the discussion, the local Muslims were harassed by young men from the local Christian community whom had apparently been under the influence of alcohol. The confrontation ended with three of the local Muslims being injured and no arrests. This caused a two-day standoff between the local

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<sup>22</sup> Regions of Georgia are sub-divided into Municipalities, which normally take the name of the largest town in them.

<sup>23</sup> While Alcohol is prohibited in Islam, there are several public and private holidays in Georgian Orthodox tradition, where friends and family return to the graves of deceased individuals to feast, which includes alcohol. Furthermore, images of humans are forbidden in Islam, while in Georgian Orthodox communities, it is common to adorn an individuals' grave with their portrait.

Muslim and local Christian community wherein the police were called in to contain the situation (JAM News, 2016). The government chose to distance itself from the situation and called upon local religious leaders to settle the dispute. After two days, they reached an agreement that new ground adjacent to the current cemetery would be given to the local Muslim community. It would have a separate entrance and would be separated from the Christian cemetery with a line (JAM News, 2016). An investigation was launched into the cemetery case, wherein six people were fined 100 lari for “swearing and scolding in a public space, insulting citizens and other administrative offenses” (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2016). An investigation was also launched to pursue criminal code 156, protecting individuals from persecution based on their freedom of expression, but nothing came of this (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2016).

Human Rights lawyers said that the decision was ‘unlawful’ and ‘unfair.’ There were signs of violation of the Criminal Code. The lawyer of the local Muslims said that his clients should be recognized as victims, however, the prosecutor rejected their claim to victim status. Gaining his clients victim status would reopen the case (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2016). NGOs and the Georgian Muslim community criticized the situation, asking why the government head did nothing while the local Muslims were attacked and why the government gave responsibility of the negotiations to religious leaders (Civil.ge, 2016). Local Christians say that they were afraid that a mosque would follow if they allowed a separate cemetery, as one Christian resident explains:

There is no place for a Muslim cemetery in our village. Being Orthodox Christians, we firmly insist on it and will not let anyone do anything! There is another cemetery in the village, so let them bury their dead there. If allocate a separate area, they will build a mosque there later, ‘- says Tina Janashia, an Orthodox Christian resident of Adigeni village (JAM News, 2016).

The Georgian Muslim community said that local police often encourage violence against them. The head of the Georgian Muslim’s Union believes that the government inspired the conflict in Adigeni. He questions why the administrative head of Adigeni was passively standing by while local Muslims were beaten in front of him. “He also claims that the head of the local police department has made disparaging remarks about Georgian Muslims and

actually encourages inter-religious tension” (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2016). The government, reiterated Georgia’s multiculturalism and blamed “outside forces” for encouraging the unrest (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2016).



## **Findings: Factors Influencing Muslim/Christian Relationships**

To restate the research hypothesis, three major factors appear to be relevant to both the origins and resolution of Georgian Muslim/Christian conflicts in Georgia: the attitudes/policies of both the central government and the Georgian Orthodox Church, and popular Turkophobia. The following sections are patterns that are prevalent through analysis of the descriptions of the cases. Each of the three hypotheses are prevalent throughout each of the cases. It should be noted that each of the cases occurs when members of the Georgian Muslim community attempt to express their beliefs in the public space through construction, or attempted construction, of a religious site such as a mosque, madrassa, or cemetery. Also, in each of the cases, it should be noted that community members are eager to express their approval of multiculturalism and good relations between the two communities.

### **The Georgian Central Government**

The government's response to Georgian Muslim/Christian conflicts will be organized into three major categories: *The Hands-off approach, Down-playing the issue, and Poor Implementation of Protections*. The Hands-off approach refers to the way in which the government avoids becoming involved in disputes and instead gives authority to religious leaders to solve the situation. Down-playing the issue refers to the way in which the government either ignores the problem, or use one of the organizations loyal to them to quietly reduce the controversy. Poor implementation of protections refers to the inadequate minority protections available to the population.

### **The Hands- Off Approach: Nigvziani, Mokhe, Chela, and Adigeni**

In several of the cases, the government takes a "hands-off approach" meaning that it gives the authority over resolving the conflicts to religious leaders rather than to government officials, because it is considered a "religious issue". The religious leaders have discussions without involvement of representatives from the central government or human rights groups and the conclusions of that discussion is accepted by the central government. The hands-off approach best characterizes the government's approach in Nigvziani, Chela, Mokhe, and Adigeni. It is important to note that each of these villages is located in a region outside of Adjara, where residents are eco-migrants from Adjara, living alongside fellow eco-migrants

from Christian parts of Georgia. The result is a religious division in the villages between Georgian Christians and Georgian Muslims.

Nigvziani was the earliest instance of discrimination against the Georgian Muslim community after the election of the new government in 2012. After tensions rose in the village, Prime Minister Ivanishvili, and several other politicians from the newly elected Georgian Dream party stated the importance of the government staying out of religious issues. Ivanishvili's government stated:

When there is a conflict between the different religions, the state must provide a chance for them to solve the problem themselves rather than interfering directly[...]if there are reports of abuse, beatings or other violations of human rights, then the prosecutor's office will launch the investigation process and get involved (Georgia Today, 2012).

This approach was chosen in order to differentiate itself from the previous ruling party United National Movement, which was noted for its "heavy handed approach". Religious leaders from the patriarchy and the Georgian Muslim community met over the issue of the prayer house and they agreed that the house would not be converted into a mosque and that people would not come to worship there from other villages, all of which violates the rights of the Georgian Muslim population.

After the minaret in Chela was dismantled and kept by the revenue service, protests broke out, several Georgian Muslim protestors were arrested and there were many reports of abuse. Tensions were very high between Georgian Muslim and Christian communities at this time, with protests appearing in other places, such as Batumi. In order to ease tensions, PM Ivanishvili paid to get the minaret out of custody with his own money, and a council was called among religious leaders (Eurasianet, 2013). This council decided that the minaret would be returned to Chela for investigation, but would be under the supervision of the patriarchy, more specifically the priests from nearby Zarzma monastery (Georgia Today, 2013). This was highly criticized by the Georgian Muslim community, who questions why the patriarchy was even involved in the situation as well as Human rights groups who call this a "preservation of the issue" rather than a solution. Furthermore, it should be noted that in spending his own money to get the minaret out of custody, Ivanishvili acted as an

independent citizen, rather than a government agent<sup>24</sup>. The central government did not get involved in the situation it instead “chose to distance itself from the rift saying the religious leaders from both sides should solve their problems without the state’s involvement to guarantee a better solution” (Georgia Today, 2013).

The case of Mokhe was another example of how the state transferred responsibility of the situation to local leaders. When the local Muslim community wanted to convert the ruins into a mosque, the church claimed the ruins were formerly a church, and should therefore be given to the church. Rather than granting the local Muslim community’s request initially, government inaction allowed the situation to grow and was then handed over to religious leaders. The commission formed to determine the fate of the ruins consisted of religious leaders, representatives from the cultural heritage preservation, and one member from the state agency of religious affairs, an organization considered to be a government puppet, rather than an entity that preserves human rights. The local Muslim community had no representation chosen by them (OC Media, 2018). Once the commission determined that the ruins should not be given to either side, the state determined that the ruins would be designated a “disputed site”. This ruling has been condemned as “conflict preservation” by human rights groups, and has not been accepted by the Georgian Muslim community.

The case of the Adigeni cemetery is yet another instance where the government did not get involved. When tensions began to rise among local Muslim and local Christian communities, the government used local mediators to solve the problem. Although the church had no prior involvement, the government called upon the patriarchy to meet with local Muslim leaders to solve the issue. After about two days of tensions, an agreement was reached between religious leaders that the cemetery would have an adjacent section for Muslims. Furthermore, after members of the local Muslim community were attacked, an investigation was launched, which resulted in no arrests, despite the fact that the incident was witnessed by several people. When the perpetrators were identified, they were given a

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<sup>24</sup> Bidzina Ivanishvili is a Georgian Billionaire who is the figurehead of the Georgian Dream party, which he established and funded himself. The Georgian Dream party is seen as his party, rather than as an independent political party.

minimal fine for hooliganism, rather than being charged with a hate crime. Local authorities and police also notably did nothing during the violence and the protests.

### **Down-playing the Issue: Mokhe, Batumi, Chela, and Kobuleti**

In the following cases, the government does not recognize the issues as a human rights issue. According to NGOs and Human Rights groups, these cases are human rights issues because they are obstructions of a religious minority's right to freely worship. What can be observed in the cases, however, is that the government does not treat these issues as such, and they are treated as isolated incidents or religious disputes that can be solved by religious leaders. Furthermore, the government uses tactics to cover up the issue through the use of compliant state organizations, and minimizing the issue.

#### *Puppet Organizations*

The State Agency of Religious affairs and the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia are both mistrusted organizations that face criticism by the Georgian Muslim community and Human Rights groups for their failure to represent the Georgian Muslim community. These organizations frequently become involved in disputes, but their responses are considered by the community as simply extensions of the government's will and therefore ineffective. The State Agency for Religious affairs is a government organization responsible for protecting the rights of religious communities, but has been highly criticized for their failure to investigate incidents of conflict as human rights issues and punish violators for hate crimes. Even more mistrusted is the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia (AMAG), a non-governmental organization, but one that is not completely autonomous from the government (Caucasian House, 2016). AMAG, as it is often referred, is largely seen as nothing more than the government's way of controlling the Muslim community as the majority of their funding goes to the salaries of the state appointed mufti (Caucasian House, 2016). The inefficiency and mistrust of these organizations can be seen in the issues of the Batumi mosque and in Mokhe, among others.

In the case of the Batumi mosque, AMAG sent a letter to the government stating that it would be better to pay for a new home for the mufti and the restoration of an unused madrassa rather than build a second mosque. Given the large number of Georgian Muslim

citizens in Batumi asking for a mosque, this is very much against the will of the community that this organization was meant to represent. Furthermore, when the government offered to allow a mosque to be built if it was put under the control of AMAG, the Georgian Muslim community opposed this solution due to the mistrust of the organization.

Another situation in which AMAG's involvement was ineffective was the case of the Mokhe ruins. After the ruins were considered "disputed" the government offered to build a mosque in Mokhe under the supervision of AMAG. Despite this decision being rejected by the Georgian Muslim community, AMAG went ahead with the mosque construction. In a report released by the TDI, after making several inquiries about the construction of the mosque, it was determined that the mosque was being built without a construction permit, which could cause problems in the future (TDI, 2018).

#### *Minimizing the Issue*

Another tactic used by the government is to minimize the issue so that it appears as an isolated incident, rather than a systemic problem. This is done through blaming of unnamed "outside forces" for the increase in tensions, the neglect of claims of human rights abuse, and the general ignoring of the situation. In almost all of the cases, the increase in tensions between the Georgian Christian and Muslim communities is blamed on "outside forces", which are never specifically named. It is sometimes implied that opposition candidates spark tensions, or possibly Turkish or Russian agents, again without being named. These tactics are used by government and church officials, and spokespersons being interviewed in the cases. Outside forces are blamed and the "good neighborly relations" between local Muslims and local Christians are highlighted. Another tactic of not acknowledging the problem is through failing to charge those responsible for attacks on Georgian Muslims with hate crimes, more specifically, Article 156, wherein citizens cannot be prosecuted or punished for exercising their freedom of speech (Criminal Code of Georgia, 1999). This can be seen in the cases of Kobuleti, Adigeni, Kobuleti, and Chela.

In Kobuleti, only after a pig's head was nailed to the door of the madrassa was an investigation launched by the police. The perpetrators were found and charged with

hooliganism, resulting in a 100 lari fine, about 34 US dollars. Human rights groups argue that they should have been charged with a hate crime, but this has not happened.

In the case of Adigeni, members of the local Muslim community were physically assaulted, with three people being injured. The perpetrators of this incident were also only charged with hooliganism and charged a small fine. TDI has argued that this is not a fair punishment, but the case cannot be reopened since the verdict was given, they are instead pursuing “victim status” for the injured Georgian Muslims in order to reopen the case.

In both Mokhe and Chela, protests erupted into violence as local Muslim protestors clashed with police. In both of these cases, protestors were arrested, and made claims of abuse by the police. In both of the cases, these claims of abuse by police have been ignored. In the protests that erupted into violence in both Mokhe and Chela, Georgian Muslim protestors were arrested and others reported both verbal and physical abuse by police. Rather than launching an investigation, the local Muslim protestors were blamed by police and the government for inciting violence.

Finally, in cases where tensions were high, police simply did not respond. In Kobuleti namely, when local Christians prevented people from entering the madrassa and set up a makeshift barrier, police did not disperse the protestors or take down the barrier. In not pursuing claims of human rights abuse, the government minimizes conflict issues by preventing it from being labeled a human rights issue, religious issue, or any large issue that exists in Georgia. Intra-religious conflict issues are instead labeled as isolated incidents, with no patterns occurring among them.

### **Poor Implementation of Protections**

Another pattern that is prevalent throughout the cases is the lack of protections exercised to protect the rights of the Georgian Muslims and the lack of representation of the Georgian Muslim community. Representation of the community occurs in the form of religious leaders, some of whom are not chosen by the community to represent them, like in the case of Mokhe. There are articles in the Georgian constitution that protect religious minorities’ rights to free speech, rights to worship, and rights to own property. The issue, however, lies in their implementation. When a need arises in a Georgian Muslim community,

for example, rather than being guaranteed or fought for within the government, the issue becomes politicized as politicians debate about what Human Rights groups argue should be a given right. Additionally, some politicians manipulate the issue into a means of acquiring votes, like in the cases of Batumi and Mokhe. The pattern that occurs in all of these cases are due to improper implementation of constitutional protections and true representations. As a result, the Georgian Muslim community must fight for their rights at a grassroots level<sup>25</sup>.

*Issues of Acquiring Property: Mokhe, Batumi, Adigeni*

As can be seen in the cases of Batumi, Mokhe, and Adigeni, one of the major patterns is the difficulty of the Georgian Muslim community to acquire property. When the community attempts to reconstruct ruined property, or purchase land for a new building, they are faced with several obstacles preventing them from doing so. It is difficult for religious organizations in general in Georgia to acquire property<sup>26</sup>. The Georgian Orthodox Church, however, is able to acquire property practically for free (1 lari or 0.34 US dollars) as part of a soviet legacy law, whereas other religious minorities are unable to do this. This is explained in a report by the Tolerance and Diversity Institute:

“Pursuant to the Law of Georgia on State Property, the state property may be acquired by natural or private law legal persons and ‘in case of direct sale based on the decision of the Government – Georgian Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church, as well’. In practice, this means that no other religious organization, registered as legal entity under public law can acquire the state property through the procedure of direct sale, except for the Georgian Orthodox Church, which benefits from the specific exception, made exclusively for it. As an additional security, it is underscored in that same Article, that the Orthodox Church is entitled to privatize for free the agricultural land owned by the State. The same guarantee is provided in Article 11 of that law, which again declares the Georgian Orthodox Church as the owner of all the agricultural land under its usage” (Tolerance and Diversity Institute, 2014).

What this means is that the Georgian Orthodox church is given a special status held by no other minority religion in the event of acquiring property. Since a religious organization cannot register as a legal entity, it cannot acquire property.

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<sup>25</sup> A “grassroots level” refers to the civil society sphere, wherein the will of the community is expressed through unorganized protests, and civil society organizations that are created from the ground up, rather than from the government.

<sup>26</sup> The Georgian Muslim Community is considered a religious organization.

In the case of Batumi, the Georgian Muslim community, tired of hollow promises by politicians, tried to purchase a plot of land through community donations and the formation of an initiative group. Their construction request was denied due to the area being considered residential despite the fact that there were several churches in the area. After the community fought this, an offer was made for the land to be brought under the umbrella of the government by transferring it to AMAG. The process remains an ongoing fight for the construction of a second mosque in Batumi.

In the case of Mokhe, despite having a claim to the ruins of the former mosque, the issue became unresolved and the dispute frozen. As explained by the TDI, it is extremely easy for the church to re-acquire property that was taken by the state during the soviet era. This is despite the fact that religious buildings in Georgia were taken from other religious groups as well. As the TDI explains:

In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Georgian Patriarchate regained its ownership on religious buildings. However, among the buildings handed over to the Patriarchate were those that were historically owned by other religious organizations existing in Georgia. Also, those religious buildings of various purposes that were confiscated during the Soviet period but did not serve Orthodox Christian purposes and were owned by the state or private parties (such as theaters, gyms, dance halls, library, etc.) remain unreturned as well (Tolerance and Diversity Institute, 2014).

While a new mosque was built by AMAG, the issue remains that the community was unable to reconstruct a building even though they had a claim.

Finally, in Adigeni, when the local Muslim community wished to create a separate cemetery, they were ultimately denied this request. The situation was able to avoid any violence or a long civil society battle, but the community was still denied their right to have a separate cemetery in the village. While all that is required for the government to give the church a piece of land is a simple request from the church.

#### *Politicization*

One issue that is frequently pointed out by Human Rights NGOs is how these cases are debated in the political sphere. When a case occurs, debates occur between politicians over whether or not the Georgian Muslims should be allowed to do what NGOs consider to



be their human rights. This can be seen in the case of the Batumi Mosque. The very question of whether or not the Georgian Muslim minority should be allowed to build a house of worship was debated upon by politicians. Groups such as the TDI and EMC argue that this is a human right guaranteed to the Georgian Muslim minority in the constitution and this should not be a debate between politicians over whether or not it should happen.

Furthermore, these cases have been manipulated by politicians as a means to acquire votes (Zviadadze, 2019). In regions where there is a large Georgian Muslim community, most notably Batumi, Adjara, and Samtskhe-Javakheti, some politicians have used the situation of the Georgian Muslim minority as a tool in their political campaign. Claims from politicians have ranged from calling them “loyal to Turkey” to promises that the needs of the community will be met. In the majority of the cases, political overtures toward the Georgian Muslim community turn out to be political rhetoric.

This can be seen in the cases of Mokhe and Batumi. In Mokhe when a politician running for municipal office promised the community that he would ensure that the ruins would be transferred to the local Muslim community. After he was elected, the ruins were not transferred and plans to convert them into a public building commenced. In Batumi, the case of the second mosque became highly politicized and were central topics on several parliamentary debates. Several politicians including Georgian Dream leader Ivanishvili promised that the mosque would be built, but this did not happen. So frequently were hollow promises made to the community that they lost their trust in the government and began to build the mosque through their own initiative.

### *Unpunished Rights Violations*

Human Rights groups point out how the lack of punishment for the abuses of the rights of the Georgian Muslim community “opened the flood gates”<sup>27</sup> for further abuses. In cases where Georgian Muslims are prevented from worship, or where hate crimes occur

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<sup>27</sup> “It has begun in Nigvziani, then continued in Samtatskharo, Tsintskharo and then in Chela [...] It is the result of local governments and law enforcement not responding to the problem adequately. If the government had made some repressive steps to solve the problem in Nigvziani, the process would have stopped” (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2015).

against them, the perpetrators are not appropriately punished. It is then left to Human Rights organizations to stand up for the rights of the Georgian Muslim population in asking for harsher punishments against perpetrators.

Nigvziani was the first example where people were not punished for their discriminatory activities. When local Christians blocked the local Muslim community from worshipping at a prayer house, a clear violation of the community's right to worship freely, no one was punished. Furthermore, Christian protestors blocked the Mufti from entering the village and no one was punished for this. In the end, the local Muslims ended up with the inability to build a proper mosque and the inability for outsiders to worship in this mosque, a violation of the right to worship.

In Adigeni, when members of the local Muslim community were attacked, the perpetrators were also only fined for hooliganism. After the verdict was given, the case could only be reopened if the victims were given "victim status"<sup>28</sup>. The only punishment that these perpetrators received was a small and affordable fine. This is all despite the fact that the head of the municipality was a witness to the attack.

In Kobuleti, when a pig's head was nailed to the door of a madrassa, an insult in Islam, this was not punished as a hate crime, but as petty hooliganism. Furthermore, the local government did not connect water to the madrassa, leaving the building unusable. The central government had to order the mayor's office of Kobuleti several times to connect the water to this building. The most that the central government could do in this situation was to consider it discrimination. The framework for protection for the rights of religious minorities exists to an extent. This is not adequately implemented however, in the cases mentioned above.

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<sup>28</sup> Now, the lawyer is trying to grant have his clients recognized as victims. The prosecutor rejected their claim to victim status, but the lawyer appealed the prosecutor's decision to the chief prosecutor and now they are waiting for the response. Even though the case is closed, it is still possible to get victim status and reopen the case (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2016).

### *Lack of Representation*

One of the major reasons for inadequate protections for the rights of the Georgian Muslim community is the lack of representation for them in the central government. While some local offices may be held by Georgian Muslims, there are no Georgian Muslim politicians in the central government. This is a noticeable trend in the cases as the fight for the Georgian Muslim community happens at the local, grassroots, level and there is no one in parliament advocating for their side. Additionally, there have been some instances where Georgian Muslim politicians have been removed from office, particularly in Adigeni municipality (OC Media, 2018). The legal legitimacy of their removal is unclear. Organizations such as the State Agency of Religious Affairs and the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia (AMAG) exist to handle minority issues, but are distrusted by the Georgian Muslim community and seen as too closely connected to the state. Implementation of terms of reference of these organizations is viewed as weak and problematic. Without these organizations accurately representing the will of the Georgian Muslim community, they are left with no real representation in the government.

The fight for the rights of the Georgian Muslim community occurs at the civil society level. The Union of Georgian Muslims is a non-governmental organization that fights for the rights of the Georgian Muslim population, particularly in the issue of the Batumi mosque. In addition to this, the only organizations fighting for their rights that understand the rights are NGO organizations such as the Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA) or the Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC). Finally, according to Eka Chitanava of the Tolerance and Diversity Institute, there has been a noticeable increase of civil society action among Georgian Muslims, an example of this is the increase of female Georgian Muslims wearing headscarves (Chitanava, 2019). While action is increasingly happening at the civil society level, the lack of representation in the central government keeps the fight for the community's rights outside of the central government.

### **Turkophobia**

In all of the cases, the fears of Turkey are mentioned by at least one of the parties involved. The fear of growing Turkish influence is quotes by members of the church, right-wing politicians, and locals being interviewed. The cited fears are that Turkey is somehow

manipulating the Georgian Muslim population to build religious buildings. It has also been claimed that these religious buildings are used to convert the local Georgian Orthodox population to Islam, which is implied that they would then shift their loyalty to Turkey. The question of the loyalty of the Georgian Muslim population is imperatively asked in these cases, and the Georgian Muslim population is forced to take measures in order to publicly assert their loyalty to Georgia through rejecting financial aid from Turkey and severing any other possibly assumed connections to Turkey.

In Nigvziani, the protests began around the proposed house of worship because people were afraid that it would be used as a base for Turkish agents. Protestors can be quoted saying that they did not want Turks to be coming to their village. Rumors began to circulate that a Turkish businessman funds Georgian Muslims in Nigvziani. The local Mufti addressed this saying:

A Turkish citizen purchased a house and then sold it to a Georgian citizen because he could not use it. We opened a temple there. Anyone claiming that we did not have enough funds to buy the house is not correct. We collected the money and bought everything with our own money (humanrights.ge, 2012).

This is one of several instances where Georgian Muslims had to prove that Turkey was not involved in supporting them.

Turkophobia played an important role in the case of Chela as well. The minaret was constructed by a company in Turkey and delivered to the Georgian-Turkish border. According to one of the interviews with an opponent of the minaret, it had to be inspected for broadcasting equipment installed by Turkey to communicate with the Georgian Muslim population (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2016)<sup>29</sup>.

The house in Kobuleti planned to be a madrassa was owned by a Turkish citizen. According to Christian protestors, Mr. Buyuk told local residents that it would become a hotel and spent a great deal of money on the building (Human Rights House, 2014). Residents were surprised and angered to find that the house was being converted into a madrassa. Further interviews showed that this was believed to be part of a Turkish plot to convert the

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<sup>29</sup> It is not verified that this was the reason for the Revenue Service dismantling the minaret.

local population to Islam as it was built in a largely Christian area. Locals believe that this Islamic boarding school intends to recruit students from the local poor population through promises of free education in Turkey (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2014). Furthermore, the man renting the madrassa was originally gifted the building, but he instead opted to rent the building to stave off accusations of being a Turkish agent. The tenant explains:

The [property owner] wanted to assign the building to us for free but the Turkish owner of the company was not allowed to cross the border. We did not travel to Turkey either. So, we refused to receive the building as a gift not to encourage additional wrong interpretations of the fact. So, we signed rent agreement. (Humanrights.ge, 2015).

Again, the local Muslims need to adamantly prove that they are not being funded by Turkey, even going so far as to deny offers of aid from Turkish citizens.

The case of the Batumi mosque has been highly politicized, particularly during election times and was closely linked to the fear of Turkish influence. A deal was struck with Turkey in 2009 wherein Turkey would restore Georgian historic sites on its territory if it allowed Turkey to restore historic Turkish sites on Georgian territory. This restoration included a second mosque in Batumi, the Azizye mosque, which was met with much protest, led by the local clergy as it was seen as a symbol of Ottoman imperialism. In 2012, after Georgian Dream took power, the deal was canceled. The mosque would not be reconstructed. Sophie Zviadadze explains,

I think it's also interesting that not only Christian Adjarans have this Turkophobic sentiment even Muslim Adjarans. It's very interesting because they accept that they are Muslims but they want not to have such a historical or cultural religious tie with Turkey. I think it's why they want to be connected with Georgia and they are afraid that if we have such a positive connection or acceptance of Turkey, they are Georgianness will be under question (Zviadadze, 2019).

In the Georgian Muslims' fight for the mosque and in their daily lives, they must continuously reassert their loyalty to Georgia. The proposed second mosque of Batumi is funded by money from the community and they have publicly refused aid from Turkey. Furthermore, the mosque would not be given a Turkish name or even be constructed in a Turkish or Persian style, instead using elements of modern architecture.

## **The Georgian Orthodox Church**

Throughout the issues of religious conflict, the role of the Georgian Orthodox church cannot be ignored. Much of the pushback against the activities of the Georgian Muslim community comes from the church either directly, or through influencing the local population. In some cases, the church becomes involved in situations where they were not initially involved, acting as representatives of the Christian community. Cases involving disputes between the Georgian Christian and Muslim population are labeled religious disputes and representatives of the patriarchy are called to meet with Georgian Muslim representatives to settle the disputes. Furthermore, members of the patriarchy believe that Georgian Muslims are not fully Georgians, the term “return” to their ancestors’ religion is commonly used. Because of this, the church actively focuses on proselytism in Adjara, in an attempt to “help return Georgians to their true religion” (Zviadadze, 2019). Because of this view about Georgian Muslims, the church is active in hindering the activities of the Georgian Muslims once they enter the public space, such as building a mosque, for example. In many of the cases, protests against the Georgian Muslims are led by members of the clergy.

In the case of Batumi, the church is the main opponent of the mosque (Zviadadze, 2019). In 2012, when the construction was set to begin on the Sultan Azizye mosque, the church organized protests against this and the deal was cancelled (JAM news, 2017). Numerous times, the church stated that they were against a second mosque in Batumi, stating that there were a large number of mosques in Adjara, more than churches and that this was unfair to the Christian population (OC Media, 2018). While the ongoing struggle for the second mosque was between the Georgian Muslim community and the government, it can be understood that this was for the sake of not angering the church. Throughout this process, there were several protests against Georgian Muslims constructing their mosque because it was believed to be another attempt by Turkey. All of these protests were led by priests (Zviadadze, 2019). Eventually, when the tent mosque was constructed, priests continually approached the worshippers and told them that they were not allowed to pray there (JAM news, 2017).

In Chela, priests at the nearby Zarzma monastery is particularly aggressive against the activities of the Georgian Muslim community. Local Muslims interviewed note that he attempted to destroy the house that was being used as a mosque in 2000 (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2015). The issue of the minaret occurred because of a petition created by the priests at Zarzma and when the minaret was being returned to the outskirts of the village, this was protested by Christians led by the local clergy. When an agreement was reached with the minaret, members of the patriarchy were called to discuss the issue, wherein it was decided that the minaret would be put into the custody of the patriarchy, rather than with the government. Finally, when the minaret was reinstalled in the middle of the night, this was met with protests by priests the following day.

While the church was not involved in inciting the protests at Kobuleti, they made statements about the situation. The statement made by Patriarch Ilia II states that while he condemns the nailing of the pig's head to the madrassa door, the madrassa should not have been built in a Christian neighborhood in the first place. Human Rights groups criticized this saying that the Georgian Orthodox Church has distanced itself from the attacks, but not from the cause of the assailants (eurasianet, 2014).

In Mokhe, prior to the local Muslim community claiming the ruins, the church did not lay claim to the ruins. After the local Muslim community claimed the ruins and tried to reconstruct a mosque, the church claimed that the building was a church before it was a mosque. Given the church's ability to easily claim property that was taken during the Soviet Union, had the ruins been deemed a church, the church could have taken it away from the local Muslims, thus preventing them from building a mosque in the village. It was also noted by several interviewees that the priests from the nearby Zarzma monastery made threats to the local Muslim community about entering the ruins.

## **Analysis**

Analysis of the patterns evident from the descriptions can be explained by the fact that Georgia is a new country. After its declaration of independence of the Soviet Union, it declared itself to be on the path towards becoming a liberal democracy, joining the West<sup>30</sup> (King, 2008). After declaring itself a democracy, Georgia essentially collapsed into civil war and the state had to be reconstructed from the ruins. While Georgia is structured as a democracy, the process of becoming a democracy, or “Democratic Consolidation” takes time. This process includes going through stages such as state weakness, issues with crime and corruption, and a fragile sense of security in the ability of the state to provide public goods (Mucha, 2007). In this context, the policies/attitudes of the central government and the Georgian Orthodox Church, as well as popular Turkophobia can be understood to be interrelated causes of the issues faced by the Georgian Muslim minority. It is in this context that these factors will be analyzed as the causes.

## **The Central Government**

Georgian Muslim/Christian conflicts grow out of an illiberal democracy in Georgia, that is, a majoritarian democracy, rather than a liberal democracy that fully supports the rights of minorities. The government is often accused of doing little to protect the Georgian Muslim minority. In fact, in several cases, the government was accused as being part of the problem. In almost all of the religious conflicts studied, the government, both local and central, sided with the dominant group. Several of the people interviewed who were involved in these conflicts described the government as undemocratic and unhelpful. Furthermore, some Georgian Muslims believe that the government is trying to use means to silence them rather than help them. As would be expected, trust in the government among the Georgian Muslim minority is low (Kalatozishvili, 2019).

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<sup>30</sup> The south Caucasus republics were rushing headlong into an era of political change, with few people who could argue convincingly for re-appropriating the brand of democracy that had seemed promising, for a fleeting moment, at the end of the First World War. When Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia became fully independent in 1991, they adopted the same flags that the Bolsheviks had pulled down seventy years earlier (King, 2008)



The rationale for its majoritarian democracy is seen in its long and tumultuous history. Georgia is still a new country. The modern nation of Georgia has only existed since the 1990s, and the years since have been turbulent times. As a very diverse country, divided on ethnic, linguistic, and religious lines, maintaining the unity of the nation can be a challenge. The ruling body's position of power is very fragile. To put it bluntly, the state is weak, although stronger than during the 1990s. A weak state is unable to provide public goods due to some obstacles such as disputes with minority populations or government mistrust due to their being a lack of consolidated democratic culture. Where the state is weak and unable to provide public goods such as the reinforcement of ideas of nationhood, another institution will fill this void like the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Nationalism<sup>31</sup> remains strong, but trust in the central government is low (Charles, 2010). Protests against the government have been frequent, with the latest occurring during this writing when protestors demanded freer elections and the removal of the speaker of parliament. The frequency of protests and the fact that Georgia has experienced only one democratic transition of power in its history are indicative of a delicate national stability. To stay in power, the government must ensure that it does nothing to anger the population and ensure minor protests do not become major revolutions. It must maintain its legitimacy through adhering to the aspects that unite the country, or rather, most of the country: democracy, history, the national religion, and the national language. To remain in power, the central government must ensure it satisfies the will of the majority population, even if doing so may violate some of its liberal democratic values.

Georgian Muslims are not members of the political majority, even though they are ethnic Georgians and Georgian is their first language. They are excluded from the political majority because they do not follow the national religion, something seen as a signifier of "true Georgianness" (Zviadadze, 2019). The Georgian Muslim minority is tolerated by the political majority for the most part, but conflict arises when a minority member enters into cultural negotiations through asserting their freedom of speech in the public space. The public space refers to what can be seen by the general public, such as celebrating a Muslim

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<sup>31</sup> This refers to nationalism of the country's dominant group, the Georgian Orthodox Christians.

holiday in the main square, or building a mosque. The dominant majority would prefer the Georgian Muslims practice their religion in private space, where a minority is easier to tolerate. The private space, refers to what the general public does not see, such as a home, or a typical Georgian house being used as a mosque. The government must respond to minority conflicts very carefully to please the political majority, as well as appear democratic both locally and abroad. To maintain the appearance of a democracy, conflict resolution is delegated to local actors or to compliant quasigovernmental organizations.

### **Democratic Legitimacy**

The conflict that occurred at Nigvziani was the new ruling party's chance to prove that it would be more open and less heavy-handed than the previous ruling party. The government announced publicly that in the spirit of democracy it would not intervene but instead give local religious leaders the authority to solve the dispute peacefully (Georgia Today, 2012). This approach was adopted and praised by Christians and even some Georgian Muslims, in all of the other cases as well. In Chela, when tensions were diffused and an agreement was made between religious leaders, it was praised as a success of democracy (Agenda.ge, 2013)<sup>32</sup>. Although this approach gave the new government legitimacy among its citizens, by allowing a peaceful discussion to occur at the local level rather than have a strict response from the central government, it treated the issue as "religious" rather than a minority issue (Humanrights.ge, 2016). The government's position was that the dispute was among Georgian Muslims and Christians and should be handled by religious leaders. This gave the green light for this type of public space negotiations. Critics maintain "It is the result of local governments and law enforcement not responding to the problem adequately. If the government had made some repressive steps to solve the problem in Nigvziani, the process would have stopped" (Georgia Today, 2013). While the government's logic is condemned

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<sup>32</sup> On 28 November [2013], the Union of Georgian Muslims released a statement concerning the restoration of the minaret. They extend they're thanks to everyone who ensured the return of minaret to its place. 'We believe that this is the event when one may say that democracy is gaining the upper hand in Georgia. This is the achievement of every citizen of Georgia regardless of their belief and denomination. On behalf of Georgian Muslims, we would like to thank everyone who participated in a peaceful and democratic resolution of this problem,' the statement reads (Tabula, 2013).

by Human Rights groups, it is approved by many citizens in both the majority and minority population as a democratic method for settling disputes (Agenda.ge, 2013).

Organizations like the State Agency for Religious Affairs and AMAG were ostensive established to protect minority rights, but have been widely criticized for not accurately representing the communities that they are meant to protect. As the study by Caucasian House revealed, they are heavily reliant on government funding, most of which goes to the organization leaders. Critics maintain that while the framework for these organizations exists, implementation is corrupted by in reality being an instrument of the government, rendering them ineffective. These organizations are unable to become autonomous as they would lose funding if they acted against the will of their patron, the central government (Caucasian House, 2016). By acting through these organizations, the government does not acknowledge that there is an ongoing and systematic issue with the Georgian Muslim minority. The government does not investigate claims of police violence, does not charge perpetrators with hate crimes, and blames each rise in tensions on “outside forces.”

Revealing police violence against a minority risks losing international legitimacy. Public prosecution of hate crimes risks the appearance of being heavy-handed like the previous regime, because it would delegitimize their hands-off approach to resolving the issues. Finally, if the government admits to an issue between the Georgian Muslim minority and Christian majority that is going unpunished, human rights groups would question why the government is not doing more.

### **Minority representation**

The protections present in the Constitution are poorly implemented. Hate crimes are rarely prosecuted. Minorities are not given an equal platform in cultural negotiations, and face additional barriers with which the dominant group does not have to contend. The question then arises, “why doesn’t the government simply give this group these protections?” The answer is that absent are politicians who will fight for the rights of this minority. This is due to a number of factors in Georgia’s society and history.

First, all of these cases happened in areas where Georgian Muslims are not the majority, Nigvziani, Mokhe, Chela, and Adigeni are regions where Georgian Muslims were

moved from Adjara for ecological reasons while Kobuleti and Batumi are large cities on the coast where Georgian Muslims are a minority. The types of issues discussed are seldom or easily dealt with in the villages of highland Adjara, where the Georgian Muslims are the dominant group.

Second, the reason that minorities in general are poorly represented in the state goes back to the Rose Revolution. Saakashvili ran his campaign promising to be both democratic and to put an end to corruption. The corruption in Georgia was in large part due to decentralization. Saakashvili sought to strengthen the state through centralization and nationalism. This turned out to be counter to the process of giving minorities more rights and autonomy, as Saakashvili needed loyalty and less of a devolution of power. This ended up in leaders in minority regions being less autonomous from the central government and ruling party. As a result, the leaders in these regions are chosen by the government (George, 2008) who would naturally choose leaders loyal to them.

Third, when Saakashvili set his sights on Adjara, he promised the Georgian Muslim population that their rights would be better protected and that they would have more representation. Because of this, the Georgian Muslims supported Saakashvili's party, The United National Movement (UNM). In 2012, when Georgian Dream came in to power, UNM had a horrible reputation and UNM party members fell out of positions of power. While it has died down, there is a common understanding that Georgian Muslims remain loyal to UNM, hurting their chances at getting elected and members of the Georgian Dream party not seeing them as their electoral base. Finally, as Pelkmans explains "since [Georgian] Muslims form the lower echelons of society, they have very little tactical power to alter these—as they see it—attacks on their community. Instead, most people retreat into forms of silent resistance" (Pelkmans M. , 2002). As Nodia and Scholtbach add:

The combination of the overwhelming poverty of the ethnic minority enclaves, the memory of separatism in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and the existence of political obstacles such as the political party law and threshold law, has created a sense of unease among the ethnic minority communities, causing them to opt out of Georgian political life altogether (Nodia & Scholtbach, 2006).

Given the historical and political climate of minorities in Georgia, it would be rather difficult for a member of a minority group to be elected to a political position. It would also be difficult for a non-Muslim Georgian to get elected to political power if they advocated for stronger implementation of the Georgian Muslim minority's right to build a mosque, for example.

Lastly, Georgians in general do not trust or believe that elections will bring about change (Elbakidze, 2019). Because of this, the fight for the rights of the Georgian Muslim minority exists at the grassroots level in the form of civil society and the aid of Human Rights Groups. Groups such as the Tolerance and Diversity Institute and the Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center give legal aid to Georgian Muslim communities and criticize the government while groups such as the Union of Georgian Muslims actively fight for the rights of the Georgian Muslim community (EMC, 2016). While these groups show progress towards representation of the Georgian Muslim minority, they only exist at the civil society level and not at the parliamentary level. Without achieving true representation within the government, Georgia faces little popular pressure to change its minority policies. Simultaneously, the government must please the equally powerful institution, the Georgian Orthodox Church, which is the source of the government's legitimacy and votes.

### **The Georgian Orthodox Church**

The Georgian Orthodox Church is a fully independent religious institution. While Georgia is a secular nation, the church is widely understood to be the national religion of Georgia. The vast majority of Georgians follow this religion. It is the most trusted institution in the nation (Charles, 2010). Christianity is deeply rooted into the history of Georgia. Georgia adopted Christianity in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD and is noted as the second existing nation to have adopted it<sup>33</sup>. The territory of Georgia is covered with thousands of Christian historical sites, ruins, churches, and monasteries. Throughout its history of invasions by Islamic empires, Christianity is seen as the aspect of their nation that has helped it survive to this day. An important aspect of what makes a Georgian a Georgian is by speaking Georgian, being ethnically Georgian, and to be a follower of the Georgian Orthodox Church. The current

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<sup>33</sup> Armenia is credited with being "the first nation to adopt Christianity"

patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox church, Ilia II, is extremely popular. He has been in power for many years, and was seen as a symbol of stability during turbulent times (Charles, 2010). Because of this historical and cultural significance as well as its high amount of trust, the Georgian Orthodox Church holds immense power in Georgia. This power comes in the form of influence over a vast majority of the population, over elections, and through legitimacy of politicians. As the TDI has investigated, the church is given privileges in Georgian society that is not shared by any other religious group. According to Article 9 of the Georgian constitution, “People are free to practice any religion of their choosing in Georgia, but the state recognizes the importance of the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church” (Parliament of the Republic of Georgia, 1995). This can be seen in the church’s ability to acquire state property and for clergy to be exempt from military service, to name a few examples.

Research also confirms the second hypothesis, which refers to the power of the Georgian Orthodox Church and its potential role in initiating or resolving conflicts between Georgian Muslims and Christians. Both groups are ethnically Georgian, speak Georgian, and have a territorial connection to what is considered to be Georgian territory. The only difference between them is their religion. Unlike trust in the Georgian Central Government, trust in the church and religiosity is very high (Charles, 2010). The church has immense influence, it is able to sway massive amounts of voters, and ultimately making it able to use its influence to remove governments from power. As long as the government is able to avoid offending the church, then the church is able to maintain support for the government. While the church is not outwardly against Islam, Islam and any other religion in the country is a threat to their power.

The church has publicly stated its opposition to Islam and any sort of advancement of Islam in Georgia. The common belief, especially among the church, is that Adjarans are “lost” and that they must “return to their ancestors’ religion” (Zviadadze, 2019). Some members of the clergy have even stated there are no such things as “Georgian Muslims” (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2016). They believe that Georgian Muslims should convert to Christianity in order to become “true Georgians.” The church conducts much proselytizing

in Adjara and is adamantly against anything seen as “the spread of Islam” in this region or anywhere else in Georgia. The Orthodox Church has been particularly aggressive in ensuring that Islam should not be brought into the public space in regions where Georgian Muslims reside.

The power of the Orthodox Church in Georgia is not to be underestimated. Many Georgians see their faith as something that has kept their nation together throughout countless invasions from Muslim empires. The institution of the church holds the role in the Georgian psyche as the protector of the nation (Charles, 2010). There is no denying that Georgia owes much of its modern existence to its autocephalous church, which maintained Georgian nationhood throughout centuries of conquest against Islamic empires. As the most trusted institution in the country (Charles, 2010), the church has the power to give legitimacy to the government and politicians (Elbakidze, 2019).

The Georgian Orthodox church is unique to the Georgian nation in that it represents the nation in a similar way that the state does. Because of this, the government must have the legitimacy of the church in order to stay in power (Lorusso, 2013). While the government must appear to uphold the ideals of liberal democracy, the government must also show that it follows and will protect the Georgian Orthodox Church. The government does this by not going against the church and even by keeping up with the appearance that it is defending it (Lorusso, 2013). What has changed in the last decade essentially is not a change within the church’s goals, but a change in opportunities to pursue those goals. With the Georgian Dream government in charge, the church is able to act against Georgian Muslims as they have not been able to under previous governments.

### **Turkophobia**

The third hypothesis is also confirmed in that grounds for mistrust of the Georgian Muslim minority are found in the historic fear of the influence of Turkey, or Turkophobia. In all of the investigated conflicts, locals protesting against the Georgian Muslim community cited fears of Turkey and their perceived “ideological war of expansion into Adjara.” (Democracy & Freedom Watch, 2014). Most Georgians, already weary of the superpower

to their north (Russia)<sup>34</sup>, see Turkey as another threat from a powerful country to exert its influence on the politics of the country. This gives way to xenophobia, or specifically the fear of Turkish expansion. As Turkey is an Islamic power and gives aid to the Georgian Muslim population, the loyalty of the Georgian Muslims is brought into question as their activities are seen as an increase in Turkish influence.

This fear of Turkish influence is not ungrounded. Adjara was a part of the Ottoman Empire for centuries before becoming a part of Georgia under the Russian Empire in 1878. With Georgian nationalism being a new idea in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Adjarans did not see themselves as Georgians, but rather as Adjarans, and many of them emigrated to the Ottoman Empire (Pelkmans M. , 2006). As part of the treaty of Kars, the Ottoman Empire, and later Turkey would ensure the protection of the Georgian Muslim population of Adjara, leading to Adjara becoming an autonomous republic during the formation of the Soviet Union (King, 2008). After Georgia gained independence from the Soviet Union and its anti-religious policies, religiosity grew rapidly. Just as churches were being built and reclaimed, so too were mosques. As the border with Turkey opened in the 1990s, Turkish citizens, many of them descendants of the Adjarans who fled during Adjara's annexation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and relatives of Adjarans who found themselves on the Turkish side of the border during the establishment of the Soviet Union in the 1920s, gave an enormous amount of financial aid to build mosques, receive religious texts, and to obtain religious education in Turkey (Pelkmans M. , 2006). This Turkish influence was met with much dissatisfaction among Adjaran Christians, calling upon historical reasons for the mistrust of Turkey.

After the Rose Revolution in 2004, the Georgian central government was able to regain control of Adjara from the independent and autocratic Aslan Abashidze. Once Abashidze was deposed, President Saakashvili opened Adjara to foreign investors, which mostly included Turks, and there was a wave of immigration and economic change in Batumi. This caused much backlash from the community in reaction to the rapid change of the economic and cultural landscape. Saakashvili's "friendliness" with Turkey was very

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<sup>34</sup> This refers to the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia and the poor relations between Georgia and Russia in the wake of Russia's recognition of Georgia's separatist regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.



unpopular throughout the country and highly criticized by the opposition. Because of this, Georgian Muslims must constantly reassert their loyalty to Georgia and their opposition to Turkey. Since then, the influence of Turkey and immigration from Turkey has remained central political issues in Adjara. Far right groups and populist politicians have made protests and Turkophobic remarks. One politician was noted for saying that “the smell of Doner kebab has ruined Abashidze Street” (Pelkmans M. , 2002) and a far-right group led a march down a street with many Turkish businesses (OC Media, 2018).

Turkey continues to be a perceived threat in Georgia as the nation’s historic enemy. Turkey has had economic and cultural influence in Adjara since its independence. Admittedly, Turkey has played a part in the economic boom of Batumi and supports the religious education and activities of the Georgian Muslims. However, the extent and motives appear to be widely exaggerated as an effect of growing inequality in Adjara (Zviadadze, 2019). Turkey is the perceived enemy and perpetrator of this inequality. Islam and Turkey are synonymous and perceived by the local population that the Georgian Muslims are influenced by and are more loyal to Turkey (Zviadadze, 2019).

The reality of the situation, as explained by Dr. Zviadadze (2019), is that Turkey does have a small amount of influence in Adjara. Turkish citizens own many businesses, although the majority are owned by Russians, and Turkey supports the local Muslim population. In the 90s, many mosque initiatives taken by Georgian Muslims were sponsored by Turks, but these were mostly Georgian Turks who emigrated after the annexation of Adjara in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Pelkmans M. , 2002). Further, most of the growing intelligentsia among the Georgian Muslim community are Georgian Muslims who receive free education in Turkey (Zviadadze, 2019).

Turkey’s political intentions appear to have been greatly magnified through fear and suspicion (Zviadadze, 2019). No overt evidence has been uncovered of malevolent intentions as ascribed to Turkey by its opponents. No collusions between Turkish and Georgian Muslims have been proven, other than financial aid. Popular Turkophobia is a convenient tool for use by right wing politicians and the Church clergy to rally local Christians to protest against Georgian Muslim activities. Despite facts to the contrary, given the history of

geopolitics in the region, the power of Turkophobia as a political tool unlikely to diminish any time soon.

## Conclusion

What this research has shown is that the attitudes/policies of the Central Government and the Georgian Orthodox Church, as well as popular Turkophobia are all factors that bear on the incidents of conflict and tensions between the Georgian Orthodox and Muslim populations. However, the ultimate issue is that Georgia has not yet developed a culture of liberal ideals necessary to accept pluralism in the cultural negotiations of its society; that is, it is not ready to accept that a “true Georgian” can be anything other than Orthodox Christian. While the Georgian Muslim minority is tolerated, when they try and bring their religious expression into the public space, i.e. building a mosque, the majority population becomes upset. This anger and aversion to cultural pluralism is further reinforced by popular Turkophobia spread by right-wing politicians, nationalist groups, and the Georgian Orthodox Church. These incidents often escalate due to a lack of well-implemented minority protection mechanisms in the government. Strong legal protections do not exist, not only due to the lack of people in the government fighting for it, but because of objections by the church as a challenge of its power. While legal mechanisms do exist, they are weak and not well implemented. But giving religious minorities more rights and protections could challenge church authority and influence. A national church at odds with the central government could use its influence with the majority population to eventually achieve its objectives by decreasing voter support for the government, which could end in the government’s loss of power.

Further, these poorly implemented minority protections give the illusion of democracy. In reality, while the government must maintain the image of protecting minority rights for the sake of democratic legitimacy, it must be careful not to do so in a way that angers the majority. A government that angers the majority population, could easily be removed from power. The government acts in a way that produces an image of protecting the minority, but in reality, ensures that the majority population is appeased. It achieves this through raising technical objections for not allowing a mosque to be built, or by creating a non-representative commission to determine whether the ruins of a mosque are truly those of a mosque, or fails to punish police officers accused of violence against Georgian Muslim protesters.

The state is weak. It has a fragile hold on power and is fully reliant on the favor of the majority population, and therefore the church, to stay in power. Being a religious institution in charge of the spiritual protection of the Georgian population, the church is understandably against any attempt by minority religions to challenge their power. They will do everything in their power to ensure that these minority religions are weakened or even eradicated so that they may remain in power. One tool that they use against the Georgian Muslim minority in particular is spreading the fear of the influence of Turkey, a challenger for influence in the borderland regions, particularly Adjara. In a perfect world, a powerful religious organization and xenophobia could be contained by a liberal democratic government, but this is not something that Georgia's government is in a position to do. Georgia's government, while much stronger and more developed than 20 years ago, is still unable to fairly resolve these issues while maintaining its power and authority.

To answer the research question of whether the government is majoritarian, the answer must be yes. It is majoritarian because it needs to be. Georgia is certainly a democracy, but an illiberal one. While democratization is not a finite and clear line, Georgia is judged to be on the path to becoming a developed and liberal democracy, which was agreed upon by all interviewees. However, until Georgia's society can develop a culture of democratic liberalism to allow for cultural pluralism, conflicts like the ones described in this research will continue to occur in the future.

What the research has shown is that among the three interrelated causes of the issues faced by the Georgian Muslim population, the role of the Georgian government is what can be changed. What needs to happen is for the state to grow in strength in a liberal democratic way. Ultimately, the state needs to be independent from the Georgian Orthodox Church in order to freely pass legislation protecting religious minorities. Second, the culture of democracy, specifically liberal democracy needs to form among Georgian society. This can happen through education expansion and reform. In order for this culture of liberal ideals to consolidate, people need to be educated in order to understand the importance cultural pluralism in a society and that majoritarianism can lead to violations of Human Rights in a multicultural society. While these changes cannot happen overnight, all of those interviewed

for this research agreed that these were what needs to happen in Georgia in order to fix this and several other problems in Georgian society.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A

### Interview 1

Interviewee: Eka Chitanava

Interviewer: Logan Hulsey

Logan: Could you start by telling me about your experience working with the Adjaran Muslim community? In or out of Adjara...

Eka: so, I want to just precise...you're basically interested into Adjaran Muslims, and not Muslims in general right?

Logan: just Georgians, right

Eka: So, first of I'll tell everyone about TDI, because mainly I'm working now on the topic of Adjaran Muslims through TDI and today I was founded in 2013, so since then we are working on the rights of religious minorities, etc. Freedom of religion bill issue. But before that I was collaborating with the Tolerance and hospice of the public defender, so my first experience with the Adjaran community was when I was on my assignment to make a little documentary video about Adjaran Muslims in ... and the rituals they observe. So that's how my interest started and also I was quite interested because how I was looking at the national identity of Georgians is that it is assumed by the majority that in order to be Georgian to have this national identity in Georgian you have to be orthodox and in that sense Georgian Muslims Adjaran Muslims, generally Muslims compose 10 percent of the population and the majority of them are Adjaran Muslims, especially in the mountainous regions, highland Adjara. they are like 80-90 percent of the population and they're Muslim. also its interesting to observe over the recent years how this religiosity and their religious identity became very important for them in the public spaces especially and to be revealed in wearing garments like a religious garment, headscarves for girls and men are demanding building a mosque in Adjara, the second mosque which is a hot issue even now and even our lawyers are involved. we submitted a lawsuit in Batumi city court about. after their statement after their appeal for building a house of worship, so the mosque was denied by the mayor's office. if we look at the dynamics, after the collapse of the soviet union they, their religiosity was not manifested in the public space and then it was after the survival of this religiosity like in other countries of the soviet union Muslims also started fighting for their rights for the equality, for the manifestation of their religiosity in the public space but that was kind of...03:57 in that period the patriarchy also started a massive wave of indoctrination and proselytism in highland Adjara, they started building special universities and schools where Muslims could study free of charge, especially in highland Adjara and so they tried to impose the idea that they're kind of betrayers of their ancestors who were Christians and after the rule of the ottomans they were converted to Islam and now it's time to convert to Christianity so it was kind of imposed this grand narrative on them and I don't remember but I remember in the beginning of the 90s with president G made a statement



that you Adjarans are also Georgians, you are ALSO Georgians means that you're kind of no you're not fully fledged Georgians and it continues until now. so this city of Batumi itself is quite multicultural its quite mixed there are Christians and Muslims but the highland Adjara is more populated by Muslims and they still reserve their traditions and religiosity and they did not reveal so much the interest to convert but also this conversion to Christianity became a kind of sign of modernity...if you want to be modern, live in an urban area and kind of be as others for the younger generation of Muslims it became kind of a necessity to convert to Christianity, especially those who travel to

the capital from the periphery to study and somehow to forge their new identity. 05:59 but we see that for the recent 3-4 years young Muslims girls especially started wearing hijab and it also was criticized not only sometimes by the Christians but by Muslims for those whom this Islam was kind of folklorized during the soviet times...they were Muslims but they were not going to mosque they weren't practicing religion so it was kind of a mixture of tradition and culture and something but not so vivid religious practice as for the new generation of Muslims it became very important to go to the mosque to have religious practice for girls to study the Quran because they can't get religious education in Georgia. none of universities have theology, Muslim theology, that's why they go very often to turkey. so this is another problem, in 2012 there was a new wave of turkophobia and islamophobia and when prior to the elections, the new party GD won the elections some of the public speakers and writers and GD members they were trying to use the issue of the mosque to stir up this islamophobia in Adjara and they were saying that, oh we don't want this smell of ciorba and kebab and so on and we want to bring back the old Adjara and not this full of Turks and those people and afterwards it became quite equated islamophobia and turkophobia and when you talk to students we had actually maybe you already saw they research about the narratives about the students, informal narratives how they see the issues so this religious diversity and ethnic diversity especially in Adjara they were saying that kinda this turkey represents a threat 08:17 to our cultural identity and represents a threat. maybe they don't want to occupy Adjara but this ??? 08:30 issue. but the issue that they might intrude to Georgia and might maybe not turn physically, but economically because Turks are coming and they have jobs and they kinda steal jobs from Georgians, ethnic Georgians so this narrative kinda creates the impression that Turkey is a threat but in this sense Georgian Muslims are a threat, represent a kind of threat. so everything that's accumulated in they cause this negative sentiments toward Adjaran Muslims but everyone says that if you go there, there are to problems in interpersonal relationships but there are problems are at the policy level 09:14 and it's a problem with how the state reacts to all of this and also up till 2012 we've seen that there were it was not particularly in Adjara but it was against the Muslims, there were cases of gross violations of Muslims right when they wanted to build a house of worship or they wanted to have religious ritual and then the minaret of the mosque was cut in chela, then in Adigeni municipality and then in Mokhe we have seen that they wanted to protect their building, well former mosque but they were physically and verbally abused and these cases are not investigated where state representatives and police officers were allegedly involved in this physical violence so this everything showed how the state reacted to it and that the state was also part of, and reproducing this narrative of islamophobia or did nothing to prevent this...so for religious

minorities in ge and sexual minorities, always the problem arises when ???10:36 when there is an issue of manifestation of this identity in the public space but yea interpersonal relations like everything is ok and when I was doing my master's degree first at CEU, I then went to do field work in Kobuleti I remember that when I entered the room of my host family and there was on the wall and on the one side there was a mosque and on the other side there was a Christian icon so they were next to each other and when I asked the family, so there were several generations of people one was a grandmother and grandfather and they were Muslims and then the next generation , husband and wife, they were, well one was Christian and the other Muslims and among children gen. they were, kinda one said one was fasting had the Christian fast and the other the Muslim fast. so it was like a total mixture and it was everything peaceful and nobody was quarreling about anything or judging each other so it really, it happens but it's important when the state is kinda instigating or not the policy is not oriented at the protection 11:57 uh or the state is not protecting the rights of minorities or somehow itself is reproducing this xenophobic narratives, then it happens when the situation is worse. If you have any questions, I know I started in ??? 12:24

Logan: no, yea you actually covered quite a bit there...yea I basically just wanted to go into a little bit of detail about what you covered....[explains research]...12:46 essentially what I'm looking for is patterns between these two kinda show the way that the state reacted toward these so if...I was interested in what you said about the importance of religiosity...a lot of what...what I've found is that a big shift happened between the regime of UNM to GD...what...I think a lot of ppl would say that this began with the incident in Nigvziani in Guria, and this was...when this went unpunished it kinda opened the floodgates basically, could you explain a bit what the difference are between UNM and GD in this particular issue.

Eka: yea, during the UNM especially during the first half of Saakashvili's tenure very strict...there was a very strict zero tolerance policy towards hate crimes, also included those committed on grounds of religious intolerance, so this meant that, it was revealed in how the state reacted towards Jehovah's witnesses, crimes against JW and we've also seen in the last years, until 2012 the number of the cases of hate crimes or offenses committed on the grounds of religious intolerance they dropped significantly. So it was a sign that then the state had very strict policy towards hate crime, so then the possible perpetrators, they somehow refrained from physical abuse, and when we've seen that during the pre-election campaign all this xenophobia, all this islamophobia, and up towards Nigvziani Tsintskhara, and it was the whole chain right. so it first started when in Nigvziani, they did not have a proper adequate reaction and response to the hate crimes and then it caused as you said, the whole chain of other events and...but what was the difference in chela and in Mokhe was that over the government was not only passive, just not doing anything to protect and to ensure freedom of religion and belief, but we also see that police officers they were themselves involved in this violence, so they were not only passive, but it was itself aggressive towards its citizens, so that s how the situation aggravated but now for instance after the establishment of the human rights department, this interior ministry, we can say that, well the situation improved quite a lot it can be said concerning all kinds of crimes,

excluding maybe LGBT, because the situation is even harsher there, but concerning hate crimes committed on religious intolerance, or racial discrimination, so the investigation is usually started immediately and then they are qualified with the adequate articles of the criminal code (??) 16:45 so the investigation is preceded and the situation in terms of this is better, but the situation has not improved in another sense, like what is it about local consuls and municipality councils who are entitled to issue the permit for construction for houses of worship and usually it happens that when some religious group wants to build a mosque for instance, like in Muslims case in Adjara, or JW in other cases or Catholics, and so on, we have a lot of examples what happens, just the majority of the orthodox population there are against it, and then the municipality decides that they don't want to offend the majority and they come up with all kinds of artificial barriers to not issue this permit, but in Adjara's case it's even more kinda difficult and complicated issue because it's not only that it is not decision (??) 17:51 at the local level, not only Batumi mayor's level but it's also kinda state..uh like decision at higher level, because it for years and years, Muslims are demanding to build a mosque in Adjara and the first they wanted to somehow to, ask the government to help them, but then they decided that it's all in vain after years and years they bought the land and ok they said we have our land we don't want your money, we don't need your anything, we just need legal permit, and then when they applied to the mayor's office they were denied and one of the arguments of denial was that: you know that this area is a kinda residential area, where the mosque cannot be built and you can build somewhere in the very high periphery, but not in this area where the land was already bought, but when we looked at kinda what their churches around, so there are churches all around in the residential area, so we see here this discriminatory attitude in the policy of the state, so it's very obvious in this case.

Logan: mmhm, ok 19:08 ...I guess I was wondering, what kind of...so you said that at the local level there's a lot of push back because they don't want to go against the majority, so...why doesn't the state intervene in this case, or is it that that they want to but they can't? like why?

Eka: well first it's the struggle with the state with needing the legitimacy from the GOC so in the case of Batumi its especially problematic, in other cases especially because there is also on the other hand the Georgian orthodox church and the parish and the congregation and it still has a high authority in the public like allegiance from the population, even though Georgians are not as Americans not really practicing religion if we look at number like going every week or having attending ceremonies, but for the identity for this national identity this is very important and they kinda identify themselves with the GOC. and so it means that they have to come with conflict with the GOC, because building a mosque...first it was called Azizye mosque of the former ottoman sultan and they changed and said ok we don't want this, we don't want Turkish money, we have our money, it's the will of the population, but also there's another institution itself AMAG we call them, it was also created somehow by the state, but it was created this religious institution to distance itself from the Azeri controlled Muslim organization so kind of to establish kind of Georgian Muslim authority and they institution that would represent the Muslim Georgian's Sunni Georgians and so it appeared that it became kind of puppet instrument in the hands of the

state to kind of control the situation like when there is a discussion about the rights of Muslims and violations and they never, they're all silence, they never criticize the gov't they never criticize the state, so the gov't. somehow needs them. and even this organization they were against other citizens their citizens and their Muslim community. the Muslim community itself has like a self-organized group who applied for this permit, they want, we NEED another mosque because now we are praying outside under this open sky in the rain in winter and so on and they say ok maybe you don't need this, maybe you need a madrassa and so they were transferred this property now they have this property and we don't see any school, madrassa or anything open there. so they have salaries and they are like silence so they never criticize the state, so in this situation this Muslims community is in a very difficult situation so the state does not want to offend the GOC because in there are also other groups like the ultra-conservative and ultranationalist groups, patriots alliance who started all this campaign, so they're kind of afraid of openly protecting the rights of Muslims because they will start the campaign and then the other groups, these far rights groups who are also instrumentalizing this issue of turkey and building a mosque so they kind of want to somehow 23:33 solve this issue whiteout following the issue and offering...now they're offering to the community to involve AMAG also in the case so this community bought the land so they want to own it right, they want to have the rights on the mosque when they build it so they mayor's office what it's doing is they want to have some negotiations and they want to involve the, also they involve some non-muslims like polit institution AMAG in this case kind of to share the space and to share the mosque and of course it won't do any good because they never represent the rights of the community in the right way. they're controlled totally by the state. so, have I answered your question?

Logan: 24:30 yes, you actually answered like 3 questions...so I've noticed this issue  
25:01...one thing that kept popping up in my research was that this issue is something that's politicized or it's in the political sphere and it needs to be not in the political sphere, do you thing that you can elaborate? how is it politicized? is it...

Eka: yea its political as long as it's as long as the state, s like actually a lot of things are related to politics in Georgia and if you mean politicized like...um...so it's kind of...25:53 it's kind of an obvious thing when they religious community wants a place to for construction permit the municipality gives this permission so it shouldn't go so far but this issue about the mosque which should be like average issue of building a house of worship, it became very political the state is involved and its decided at a very high level, but the argument of the other...like some experts or some gov't representative is like that there is no problem it was all politicized and the issue was used by the opposition party actually, so GD members say that it was used by UNM, this Mokhe, chela, cases were started by them to start this conflict and to show that the Muslims rights are violated in reality, we don't have any problems and we are all tolerant and Muslims were never persecuted and so on and so on. as long as the state it's the responsibility of the state to protect the rights and to ensure that the citizens have the rights to manifest their religion without any problems in the public space so as long as the state responsibility and it's not protecting the rights of the citizens this issue is political, so I don't think that its artificially politicized by any group, it just concerns the issue of the policy of the state, how it cares about for about a religious

minority, about the rights of religious minorities and it's also political because we have here the problem of the separation of church and state and this protection of the secularity principle like this separation between these two institutions and so far the state, like neither governments like neither UNM or GD have managed or especially previous govts to completely distance themselves from the church because they still need their legitimacy so as long this issue is not solve as long as they don't care about what the church says and like candles and go with what the patriarch says and initiate some legal issues according to the what the patriarch says right so like...it will be political as long as the issue is like this it will be political.

Logan: ok...29:11 so I guess I'll kind of go a little more into your opinion so how do you think this issue might be solved, like what do you think, what are the steps that could be taken in a perfect world to fix these issues?

Eka: you mean like everything concerning Georgian Muslims of the thing I was talking about?

Logan: yea

Eka: so first when we are talking about hate crimes it's a fully necessary that the state is responding to them timely and effectively and the public sees then that when you commit such a crime there is punishment for this, so it's a kind of short term but very powerful instrument, so responding to hate crimes and another one is that you can't like ensure that everything is improving long term only with this instrument so education is very important so we are also working on the formal education system in Georgia, what are the teachers attitudes, how they talk with Muslims in Adjara schools they have a kind of impose the idea and aculeate(?)30:41 the idea that if you are Muslim you are, you know you converted to Islam and it was not your will it's what your ancestors did because this was all conquerors and so on (???)30:50 so they want to somehow talk about their this identity and the sense of the old traumas and for them they have not experiences this this is not their collective memory, what they know is what their parents were Muslims they are Muslims and they like something in the practice but they don't have to feel ashamed, and actually there is a good anthropologist, Tamta Khalvashi, she talks about their shame, how they are ashamed of their identity and the public makes them to be ashamed and so this deals with the environment, this is a matter of public education system, what are teachers education, what text books do they have to study and in the textbooks of Georgian literature and history how Muslims are represented all the time, Islam is always related with the conquerors and when you have this memory and you have this narrative that Islam is only associated with conquerors and with the ottoman empire and the Persian empire and so on and so this means that you can see really other things like culture, common culture and you can see like that this is a part of this multiculturalism and is a part of this kind of multicultural culture that we have today in Georgia and it's also about tradition so another thing is like the big milestone is education, public education, and reforms and fundamental reforms in the public education system and like also how the state policy, not only in terms of hate crimes but all other issues, well public education is also part of state policy but the statements of the officials and the statements of the high officials like the parliamentarians

and public figures how they embrace this, to show that they embrace this multiculturalism and that they embrace these differences in identities and Muslims are kind not involved, politically involved in their local government issues so there was a research done by Muslim women and they, what they found out is that political engagement and civic engagement is perceived only as voting for somebody and going to elections otherwise they are passive, but in the case of building a mosque, one of the oldest issues surrounding this self-organized 33:47 group. women also became very active, Tariel Nakaidze for instance the head of the Georgian Muslims union so he created like young youth group also the wing of this organization and Muslims are very active. Muslims girls are very active, young girls who are very active who on the one hand are wearing these religious attire and on the other they are talking about equality and so-so for them the hijab is not a tool of intimidation or submission as it is represented in popular culture, but for them it's kind of a tool of protest of their civic protest, because they're going against the majority in this sense, so for them a hijab has a different meaning, different cultural meaning, kind of a cultural or political meaning also. so the statements and the attitudes of the public officials who appear in the media who appear in the media and in social networks and so on in the public space, so this is very important to have influence over the public sentiment and then of course how the state will distance itself from the dominant religious institution GOC and how, what kind of policy it will have towards minorities, so everything is interrelated to each other.

Logan: 35:17 yea ok great, and then a follow up on that, so again, that's what should happen, so...as it is now, Whats your opinion, do you think it'll get better or do you think it'll only get worse? like are things getting better?

Eka: well the things is getting better up till the changes in the interior ministry for sure (??)35:42 with hate crimes (?) but I hope that it will continue this way, but you know the situation is so unstable it really depends on the political will on the government because currently we don't have like strong institutions judiciary and we are dependent on political persons on particular persons like in the ministry and we are collaborating with them and we are involved with the, like me personally in the assessing of some textbooks and then evaluation and then giving recommendations and improving the text books and I hope that the next textbooks for the 7th grade will be better than they were before, so far we have the opportunity, so far things are improving in this sense, but you never know, like the changes that these people go from the ministry you don't know whom to talk to so it's not the us where you have trump but there are institutions and you still have these solid institutions and if there are many trumps around then...so in this sense it is very difficult to anticipate what will happen so I still hope that when I look at the, like there are many positive changes not only in this since but in the broader sense like we are now seeing like 10 and 11 days there are civic protests outside so the public changed and the sentiments and priorities of the citizens are changing so I think they are more civically active more ready, more open minded more open to embrace the diversity as well because the group of people who are outside now are very diverse, like they have different political taste or preferences and they have, and some of them are homophobes some of them are LGBT and human rights activists and so on and they are kind of united around the same cause and they know how to fight about rights so I think that the new generation which comes will be more tolerant and

more acceptable of the diversity and so yea, I hope that it will be better, but still it is really difficult to anticipate anything because it depends a lot on who'll be the government and how the parliament will look after 2020 and I hope that we will have these proportional elections and we will have this diversity.

## Interview 2

Interviewee: Marina Elbakidze

Interviewer: Logan Hulsey

Logan: Have you personally done any work with the Adjara Muslim Community?

Marina: Not directly, but separately with Muslims...in Adjara but I'm working many years in this NGO and in different times we have different kind of projects and activities in the region so I had a chance to meet people in the frame of discussing of problems of religion minorities and in general minorities and during these discussions we had also Muslims minorities and Adjara Muslims too. and somehow, I had some connection with some people why. Mean young researchers who were working with these people maybe 5-6 years ago working on this issue, so I have some communication with this topic I mean some contact with this topic and these people but I never worked personally with them. but I know this.

Logan: ok but you have worked with other religious minorities...

Marina: yes, in general with minorities so including them, yes.

Logan: 01:48 great, um so if I can I want to ask about the differences between the minority situation with UNM and GD, so for example...is the GD govt has it created a better situation for minorities than under Saakashvili? or is it better than under Saakashvili?

Marina: I think that they did not create it, I mean the new govt, GD, something new or better but in general, in my opinion of course, it's in general, they created a more democratic case in some understanding, and in this case it became better for minorities, it does not mean that they I mean particularly know how to solve or care about this issue but at least they are not using in a bad way this minority issue, During Saakashvili it was more...if there were some problems, the solution was more strict, more how to say...

Logan: heavy handed?

Marina: yes, heavy handed, no discussion, just boom, this should be done in this way and that's all. and if you're talking about some changes, it's not heavy handed but still there are problems, in general, the condition is better.

Logan: 03:52 so more democratic?

Marina: yes, I think so, I mean not because I have some political preferences but I mean with what I have seen before and what I see today, this is how I feel.

Logan: 04:10 is this apparent with the minorities you work with?...err like can you see this in your work?



Marina: 04:22 yes, as you know I'm working every month...I am looking in whole Georgia as it's not very detailed but I'm trying to follow how it's going, how processes are going in whole Georgia regarding minorities in Georgia especially in places where they live...more densely populated. what I see is different cases with how previous govt is working and how new one is working and even if we talk about, you have in SJ and I think you know that in ww2 the population, so called Muslim Meskhetians were deported from this place during soviet times and in the 90s there was a big discussion about repatriation of these people, people who want, they were sent to central Asia and some of them wanted to come back and a very small community came and they all...even the declaration policy was from Georgian side, in 90s it was crazy, it takes long time to describe these processes and it was not so important but during Saakashvili we had a law 06:25 that we were responsible for these people who wanted to come back, we should solve their problems, give them somewhere to live, etc. but even it was an official policy but in reality it was very hard for these people. even today if [???] 06:50 the new govt they do not have citizenship, of course there is some problems, some real legacy problems, they have not done some things in a proper way, I mean these Meskhetians I mean their grandchildren and great grandchildren who came back, but looking at these I mean how was this negotiation with govt and with these people and local govt and central govt I could see openly very clear that govt did not want to give them citizenship, there was different, I mean during Saakashvili, different barriers, somehow to stop this process, so it was declaration for I mean...European structures, etc. for international for of course we are democratic country, we are ready to get them back to receive them, but in reality it was very hard for these people, today I can say that its it is not...there are not solved all these problems of these people but what I see, at least I did not hear maybe there is, there is not...I did not know examples regarding how govt officials are trying just to...to give them obstacles, not to...to make this way of returning I mean as...complicated as possible, it was what it was before and during Saakashvili's, and I mean before too but if you compare these two during this new govt I did not hear these examples maybe because they are not trying to come back because they are finally I mean understand that this society and this country don't want them or something different...sorry, I'm talking a long time about it but it is one case that you can compare this situations, yes and even you know these cases in regarding the chela and all these mosques, so I'm not going to tell you, I think the same problems are in both governments have the same problems but if we compare cases in this case, this now it's less how to say violent or brutal, less brutal, these guys are using less brutal ways, it does not mean they are not using but it is a bit lower .

Logan: 10:11 so in my research I've noticed that there's a pattern of for example Muslims want to build a mosque and the govt says ok but they do a similar situation with the Meskhetians where they make it complicated and they kind make it where like you need to understand that we don't want you to do this but they don't say that.

Marina: you mean again about Muslims, they want to build mosques, or in general, because the problems also have Catholics, and I mean all of the religious minorities how to say are not ...are in an unequal situation to compare with the GOC, I mean with Armenians. their mentalities their people, these politicians are not declaring what they think but what I see all

but one part of them is, you know we are a Christian, orthodox Christian country so of course it is natural that we need to have more rights than others, even they cannot understand that it's not I mean democratic or fair or that it should be equal . 11:32 ...and there were some examples regarding Catholics and some Armenians...[describes how Armenian church is different] one is that there is a dispute and discussion regarding the churches between Armenian and Georgian church between who belongs this or that church and last time there was this dispute in SJ regarding two churches, I don't remember the names of the villages now...there are two old churches, they are ruins really, and they wanted to rebuild them but one question is of course if this is a cultural heritage you can't touch and you have to receive permission from institutional who is looking and ruling this process, this is one issue, and they are not very...I mean Georgians Armenians who are people living in Caucasus they think that ok this is in our village, these ruins so we can just rebuild and its good and we are good guys and we are doing some good things but ok now they know that they have to get permission, but after this...it happens a few times when someone is talking about the building or restoration of this church, again there is a question, then who is...whom belongs this church and then again there is this discussion that it is not yours its ours and again so, there are different reasons why this process...why it is not so easy to build a new one or to rebuild the old one, it's because of the law etc. but second is that Georgians are not ready even everything is regarding the law everything is ok but then it is again a question, why do these minorities have to build their churches, why their mosques, etc. because we are orthodox etc. etc., yea this is in the mentality so govt also plays some tries to play some between these two groups to make it more worse, what they are doing today. and there was also a few cases with Catholics in SJ they wanted to build a totally new one, just to avoid these disputes over who belongs this church because these disputes can be between Catholics if there are ruins and its...you never know who built them in the middle centuries this church but all participants think that they do it, maybe they do it together, but now they pretended that it was done by Georgians, by Armenians, by Catholics, etc. and they wanted to build new one in an empty place and again it was a problem and with Muslims there are more problems because Muslim...and in different places in Georgia and you know about the Azizye [mosque] in Batumi about which it was ruined in soviet times but also there were many small buildings mosques and in many villages they wanted to build or to use and yes they had problems, it's not so easy usually what they are doing they have their buying houses or using someone's house just to use it as a place where they can pray . I am talking in General...and also there is a problem at new one in Shida Kartli...in Shida Kartli there are Georgians and you know after independence Georgia became more religious I mean in behavior in many churches are rebuilt and you if you traveling Georgia its very different from soviet times, in soviet times there were just a few churches in everywhere but one or 2 in all regions which was I mean functioning as a church and today you see old ones functioning as a church and new ones in every corner etc. and in Shida Kartli there was also in everywhere these old churches and there are some old churches which were rebuilt and used now GOC using, their lives I mean it's very active there are all these religion people etc. and they are how to say very they became more bigger I mean society community of this religion...church and in Shida Kartli. From 90s we also have some eco migrants from Adjara I means Georgians they were Georgian s they were also ??18:00 a small population but they left in 90s but it's not about stories is

not about this ok and some Adjarans I mean people Muslims of course moved from Adjara as they moved to SJ they moved to Shida Kartli near Kutaisi or some this place and when they moved the on the all these old churches they were just empty but of course they didn't use these churches but step by step these old churches became functioning and now orthodox church is now working there and trying to make they somehow privatize...some lands some agricultural paces all these buildings bought some empty houses from their owners or idk they have this...they want to control this like in the middle century not church but some rich high level [feudalists]...19:34 and these people they have some conflicts there is a tension between Adjarans and this GOC these priests etc. ...and there is a tension between this and two days ago and they are sort of trying to convert these people they are saying you know you are Georgians and it's not right to be Muslim etc. and somehow they're trying to, some of the Adjarans decided to leave this place and to move again back idk...this is something new but in 90s it was a one big how to say...they want to switch all these Muslims to Christianity because our moment was so...you were in past you're Georgians you were in past Christians and you are now Muslims because you were under control from turkey for 3 centuries and it was something...this is the reason why you became Muslim etc. and now it's time to come back to...and some people have I mean some families had problems because young generation wanted just to be part of this Christian society the traditional older they had different vision and even this political or some vision make some ...problems inside families and its maybe not big because it's not so very...so I think for them it's not so easy sometimes and they don't like idealism but it's not the right question to ask someone to ask what is their religion but in Georgia so are you orthodox? do you have the cross? and they are just afraid to hear this question they prefer just to say so a few of them told me when someone is talking and they are ??22:24

Logan: so I guess my next question refers to that so yea so he church obviously has a lot of power and wants to convert so my question is, like where is the government why doesn't the govt...let's put it this way I guess an ideal kind of liberal democracy the govt would make certain protections for these minority groups and say ok you can't infringe on their right to be Muslim, you have to build their...or not even just them, you should let them build their church etc. I guess my question is why doesn't the govt do that? why doesn't the govt step in and make these protections?

Marina: so in this case we need to talk about the relationship between govt and church and the role of the GOC because the church as I mentioned people became at least formally so religion and many of them has their own...someone in the church who you are...ok you know there is a community in the church and all people in this community have their own priest who is...when you have to tell everything about what you have done, like a confession...ok it doesn't matter I mean people who are religious...[goes off track]24:57 church plays an important role in our society and for govt and for politicians it is important to have a good relation with the church so it's a like an it's also a plays a political role in our society I mean church this is why govt officials are trying, I mean we have a secular state but still this church plays an important role so they are trying somehow to...I mean people from govt because if the church can say something against some politicians etc. then it means that people who are in this church and if this priest is important then he says that

no before the election that ah somehow not directly that you have to vote that this is good guy and this guy is bad then you are losing your voters so this is a political game if to say shortly and in this political game the church is also playing an important role so they have to I mean officials have to make some reverence to the church .

Logan: 26:35 what was, so I know GD and the church get along pretty well, what was Saakashvili's relation with the church?

Marina: it was somehow the same but it was during Saakashvili when at the time or maybe it was during Shevardnadze...but at least there was and still we have a law that the GOC receives money from the budget and every year it is higher and higher and its unbelievable I mean state budget and the church which is separate and they get money from the...and during Saakashvili they had a good relationship and even the church was included in the budget and no one was checking it was how to say there are some tax services and special kind of services and all organizations have to I mean report how they spent money except the church but it's also not very I mean logical because if you receive money from the budget you are responsible to report what you spend and how you spend I mean this is also a sign how...and this is also...so if you officials and politicians just giving to church this rights it means that the church also with something I mean giving something some relations I give you something and you give me also something not because they are very religious and they think that church and then there were discussion in society I mean why only GOC receives money from budget and then I don't remember the year but there was created a new law and according this law other religions also have money from the budget but it was after the budget why only in democratic country and in secular state why this and then it changed a bit but so and church is enough very rich institution and have influence in society and this is so why govt is somehow politicians um yea trying to have good relationship with church but opposition is very critical on this stage they criticize very much church but when they were I mean national movements they were in the government...when they were ruling party they also had religion but they are now criticize but yea, its I agree with a lot of things to criticize the church I am also critical but they are using this again as a political issue not because they are...

Logan: 30:11 so what, what would happen if, and just in your opinion, err, how could the state kind of distance itself from the church a little more do you think so you said there's this kind of reliant relationship, what if, err how could the state become less reliant on the church, how could the state become stronger?

Marina: is a good question when the state will be stronger when it becomes stronger...[grammatical question]...then the state can somehow make less...not communicate very so very close with church but how our state will become stronger I mean it's a huge question I mean its now what you see on the streets its now this issue that the state is not so strong and weak I mean it's complicated and yea, because the opinion of society depends I mean some in some part of our society depends on what is church saying so...we are weak state what is problem why govt is trying to have some relationship with church and I do not have answer is, it is long discussion I mean long and clear answer .

Logan: 32:18 so would you say that these issues with minorities...obviously the church is against t like Catholics building a place and the govt is so reliant on the church that is probably a big problem that they haven't helped these minorities...

Marina: yes, this is serious problem yes...

Logan: so, would you attribute or would you say that these problems happen because of state weakness, do you think?

Marina: do you mean all these problems with minorities?

Logan: yea, right...

Marina: 33:27 its one because state is weak and second one that the mentality of our society is still idk how to say not enough mature and in Georgian society what I see during the years in the 90s were a bit crazy that these Georgians and it's not only in Georgian society but it depends on how much it is what I'm going to say now...Georgians still think that uh...Georgians in society has to have more rights because this is, I mean...because Georgia belongs to Georgians and right Georgian is a Georgian who is I mean orthodox Christian and even Georgians Muslims there is something not right there is something wrong with them I think when we met first and I think this is a problem of mentality still these are unequal if you...even this all its not...I'm talking not whole society because there is very healthy maybe they think I'm not healthy my mentality, I mean young generation even old generation but whose thinking that everyone in a normal country has to be equal and its etc. but still in Georgian society there are visions that people are different and they have different status and regarding their religion and ethnicity and people have different rights in our mentality what I wanted to say and if you are sexual minority it's the worst thing, like religion ok but its, but I have to underline again that its very small and this active group who is against and maybe you've followed in these last days and months they were against this pride of LGBT and we have a few organizations its uh, one is Georgian march...and another one, there are a few, but a more active one the union of orthodox parents, yes you know this, and really they are really aggressive and sometimes they say but we are not killing them, they have right to live but don't show it, lets...what they are saying that they should sit at home not be visible in society etc. that at least I am happy that this part is very small this organization who is saying this...but yes we have, I mean this radical groups also but really they are really small, but people who are in the middle their opinion...if something happens then their opinion depends on I mean I call it middle average person, someone from the street and he is open maybe to receive I mean some very...democratic values and some radicals but it depends who is working with them who is saying at this moment this space in this moment then people are switching to or that place so why it is important so maybe the biggest part in society is maybe not aggressive but neutral but when something happens and people somehow make decisions what is their position and it depends very much on what these active groups are saying even this discussion that is in the street on the tv regarding this what happened in 20 of July I mean this Russian guy who was in parliament etc. for me it's really to say it's nothing so important to say I mean it depends on which side you are analyzing this process because he was invited just as a part of all this conference I mean and no one stopped him on the border then he was invited on this whole

and as a rule then the head of this organization as I understand someone told him let's take this place as I am saying you maybe we sit in this room or that and then it started something really crazy process I think it was mistake from GD and...but as national movement they knew all this information, why they did not stop? because I read all this information that this event will be held in Georgia on 11 of June because for my report I also told that this Christian I mean how they call it assembly they will be in Georgia and of course all members of parliament they knew not society, I had this information because for my job not because I...ha-ha...and people they are interested on this issues and but opposition was informed of course because its parliaments decision and opposition is also some members of the opposition from the opposition and from majority they and few from this and few from this they are members of this assembly they have been in different countries they have seen and they knew all this I mean participants and they said nothing not stopped I mean all this process they could say why its good idea we call in Georgia and his Russian occupant etc. what they are saying now and suddenly they start...but what I wanted to say they just used all this situations for their political agenda and I was talking about people from the street and they send this message oh something very bad happened, this Russian occupant is now sitting in our parliament in the chair in the head of the parliament they just started all this game and even people who know this they cannot even say that you know all...then all started repeating this Russian occupant that this Russian...[takes phone call]...

Logan: 42:56 ok ill just ask my last question if you don't mind yea so my question is how do you think things might get better so what I mean is for the religious minorities, how might things get biter for them? what changes could be made?

Marina: it's one is that state should become more strong and the question how to make them strong it's not too long story and also state and some organizations I mean we have to I mean the mentality I mentioned about the mentality and values is a problem in our society it does not mean that we are totally crazy but if we want to make something better the mentality should change and of course question is how to do this and nothing will happen but it's different how to say ways I mean some...some organization has to work in this direction, young generation has to get good education not only something, I think things are better and better it's a young generation is more open etc., what we need if answer shortly it's to change the mentality and to make state more strong but its same question how to do this and its of course ling discussion there are ways of course to change but someone I mean some organization or structures or institution has to work in this direction, if you leave everything as it is then do nothing then it became worse and worse than it was even this programs, these higher education exchange between young people when people are traveling in different countries they can see different people it we have enough different people but still it's a different lifestyle etc. it makes some changes, good changes I think, it helps of people in young generation in old generation too but its more realistic than to offer...to education in different countries to young generation like I mentioned about young but old people so are changing their mentality that does not mean that they...

### Interview 3

Interviewee: Tatia Kalitozishvili

Interviewer: Logan Hulse

Logan: ok, sorry, um

Tatia: I did my master at Ilia state university, So, I studied sociology, but I had two elective courses in anthropology and I guess that ethnography and anthropology is the field that I really would like to investigate deeply, so that's why I decided to conduct ethnography research, and I visited one of the multicultural villages in Kakheti. A It is called Gombori where Iranians, Azeris, and Georgians, and Russians live together peacefully...00:47Â yea it's a village people just do not speak about it and do not know about it. This is a very beautiful road from Tbilisi to Telavi, shorter one. And this village is there, exactly. And the road divides it into two parts. There are Muslims, Shia Muslims, and Georgian Christians, and yea these Russians, these polish people live there also, because this was a military base under Soviet Union and earlier, and there are some Russians and there are some military base and some multi story buildings. and so, this village is very different, and I based on these shared religious traditions, these Muslims and Georgians have, I tried to investigate their peaceful coexistence there. And it was really cool. I observed their everyday life and took part in their religious rituals, and celebrations and it was really cool. It was a rely cool experience, I gained many friends there, these Muslims, and even now I very often visit them and we have some kind of good relations.

Logan: that's cool, I actually also studied anthropology, but back in America

Tatia: That's cool, it helps you understand yourself and other people better

Logan: so...

Tatia: I wrote a tiny piece of, about this coexistence and this is the coauthored article, and I can share this with you.

Logan: Sure! I'd love to, um sorry so you said this, in this village, this was your master's thesis?

Tatia: [nods]

Logan: ah, ok, so can you tell me, um about the work you did in Adjara a little bit? 02:47

Tatia: yea, so we...so 2 kinds of work I did there, so I worked for the project which promotes democracy and in the regional cities we often conduct some interviews and some discussion about the ongoing political situations, and there in Batumi, I and my small team of 3 interview these political party members, members of different political parties; mainly the opposition. But the Georgian dream as well. And so, these talks were about politics, and you know, when you speak to people you can understand more about the culture and their environment. So, I know some of these politicians there because two times we were

there and very often with students and professors we gave discussions there. And another thing I told you about these impressions I got between these Muslims and [inaudible] is that I was involved in the ethnobotanical research and during two summers we. So, a student from the university of Florida, the PhD student and me visited this...various villages and spent time there during a week or more. We lived with them and shared their lives and lifestyle and everyday life...04:22 we conducted some interviews about plants and about botany, but as we spent so much time there, we had very...talks, about various issues and...04:34 mainly this research was about this ethnobotany...use of plants.

Logan: oh, so it's like how they use them in medicine and stuff? that's really cool

Tatia: for food and for different reasons

Logan: oh wow, that's really cool...04:51 So, I guess um, I'm interested to hear about your time with these families, and these uh, mixed families and stuff, um, I guess...05:14 so you said that the Muslim Georgians truly feel themselves Georgian you said.

Tatia: truly Muslim Georgians?

Logan: err, right so in Adjara, I mean their Georgianness, there's no question about this right? like they completely feel Georgian?

Tatia: yea, they feel that they are Georgians but they want to explain this to Christian Georgians that they are full Georgians, complete Georgians, to prove this, so they want to make other people learn that this thing that they are Muslims, does not make trouble and should not make trouble for them to be considered as Georgians. so other people think that, I think other Georgians who are Christians at the same time, sometimes for them it's difficult to understand that as someone is Muslim, he or she is not complete Georgians, because for most of us, the majority of us, Christianity is very strict indicator to...06:23 believe, or think, or consider someone is Georgian or not. And these Muslims really feel that they are part of Georgia and part of this state and nation but they want...they feel a little but, not abandoned, but they feel strange and weird because of this, because of their religion, and they want to explain this "no, we are Muslims, but we are Georgian" this narrative works I think.

Logan: right, interesting, so are they, like...what...06:58 what are they trying to say basically, are they trying to say, like Georgians don't have to be Christians.

Tatia: no, no

Logan: like, uh, I guess what I'm asking is like, how do they prove their Georgianness...07:16 what are they doing, are they...is it in conversations?

Tatia: yea

Logan: ...like where they're saying "no I'm Georgian even though I'm Muslim or are they protesting are they, are there organizations trying to...

Tatia: so they, in ...I think in the conversations and even in their everyday life in there, so they speak a lot and share their experiences with their neighbors, you know, especially



village life is part of this informal uh, informal types of relationships, where neighbors are very close friends, and every day they cooperate and do some things together. Like they have shared coffee or dinner so they have more friendlier relationship...I think that in their conversations everyday experiences is like this, and these young people speak more often about this. To be frank, I think that...so this issue is important for them but they don't like to underline a lot and speak constantly about it. I remember while having our interviews when I asked their religion, they would say Muslim but they did not tend to discuss this issue deeply. Btu when you spend more, a lot of time with them you get this, you feel this situation, and its natural. For example, I, last time I was in Batumi, I was in an ice cream parlor and there were young, so school students, maybe high school students that I could listen to them because their table was very close with us and they were just to find their ancestors their grandparents, they love their religion they want to practice this religion but it's not their fault, so the Turkey invaded them and it's their tradition and we should not be angry with them we are Christians but we should respect their religiosity and its nit their fault...09:28Â this is because of this invasion. They talk like this...09:33 they want to respect this, but at the same time justify why they are Muslims....

Logan: 09:41 so, so they feel like they're Muslim, like but it's not their fault that they're Muslim...

Tatia: yea, exactly, but these young people mainly, and in this older generations really, but they think that it's not their fault, turkey invaded them, but it is their tradition, but it is their history and they don't want to abandon this and they don't want to change this. and ok, so one of the lovely grandmothers told me that I'm Muslim, but my son is Christian because her...10:15Â his wife was...before he got married was Christian and he changed this religion, he converted from Muslim to Christianity and its ok to me, she told me. She was very lovely and fluffy woman, and she told me like this. But she wanted to maintain and keep her religion. It was not a...so what is good is that in one family you can feel, see this diversity.

Logan: yea, yea that's very interesting

Tatia: but mostly, it is young people really most of them are Christian, and you know in Adjara, and I'm sure you have been right?

Logan: yea

Tatia: there is Keda, there is three municipalities, Keda Shuakhevi, and Khulo and in Khulo most of them are Muslim including these younger people, these young people, so some of them are orthodox, but most of them are Muslim, and in Shuakhevi, fewer, and in Keda, fewer and fewer people are Muslim, so when you go into the mountains.

Logan: yea, like the deeper you go yea...11:43 so what I guess, what I was trying to ask, so what it sounds like to me is that these Muslim try and prove their identity in a more in a private space, do they try and prove it in a public space. Like for example, um...so...so what I'm saying for example is like, building a mosque basically is kind of their expression in a public space saying like...

Tatia: mmhm [in agreement]

Logan: ...saying like ok we we're here, we need to be accepted and I think that is where the issues come in, is when they try and prove themselves in a public space would you say this is true?

Tatia: yea, so they have this public spaces, so it is very interesting that in the villages, which are not very tiny and very small villages, they have these mosques but you know what is the difference, they uh, I think are not allowed or do not try to build the real mosque, which the construction is...

Logan: right, yea

Tatia: but houses are converted into mosques

Logan: ah yea I read about this

Tatia: it's very interesting, one of the houses is converted into a mosque and they go and pray there, and all or most of the villages have this tiny thing, for example in what I told you about Gombori, uh Muslims there also have this...also wanted very much to build a mosque, but this village is very poor and they were not allow and financially of course, they are not able...they need some...financial help. But these Muslims say that these Georgians do not let us build a mosque and they converted one of the houses into a mosque and they call this a mosque. And in Adjara and in many villages, I have seen these mosques, so there's just an ordinary house you can't guess that it is a mosque until the locals tell you that it is a mosque. and there are some.

Logan: is this a new thing? that they've turned these houses into mosques or has this been happening for like 100 years or something?

Tatia: I don't want to...I don't know, I really don't know and I don't want to give you misinformation. But now, really, some of them are renovated and some of them has some very modern um...piece of construction and things like this. They go there and really pray and use this public space, but they...for example in Gombori it's not about Adjara, but in Gombori people feel a little bit worried and sorry that they don't have a real mosque and they have that, just this house. Maybe in Adjara they also they have this...worries and concerns, but they, they really don't feel good that they don't have this. But I'm pretty sure. So men are more courageous in speaking about this, I think. If you ask about this, they will tell more, and this is just the impression of just what they say. As we walked in the villages, and they really have these house, and this is public right?

Logan: so?

Tatia: converted houses, so houses converted into mosques.

Logan: [tells story of chela] ...15:49 so I guess next I was just going to ask, just kind of about, um, how do you, how do the Muslims feel about the government? Do they feel that the government is something with them or something against them? do they feel that they can trust the government to help them basically?

Tatia: umm...it is a bit difficult question really, because in Georgia, even Georgians do not feel like the government is not on their side or something or that they cannot trust the government every time we request to...we want to remove and eliminate the government, especially in the Muslim community I think maybe these kind of impression are stronger...16:42 so people...but, I, I'm...I don't know exactly, what happens there, what kind of perception and attitude they have. Because we have never talked about this. But, this...for example, based on Gombori, that the government does not help us build this mosque and this means that they don't have much expectations and trust in the government. But it...like really, it's my impression, and I really have not talked a lot about this.

Logan: ok, um...so like, for example...so you're saying just in general, trust in the government in Georgia is just very low. If you know... who do you think that uh they would go to if they had like some issues, would they go to government authorities? or would they try and handle the issue on their own, like a cultural leader or something, or like...

Tatia: so there are some um local representatives of the government in two main...representative are important, so the sakrebulo, which is their elected deputies there and work for the region and the mayor of this...so if they have this...some problems and things, some public problems or in their neighborhood or something, I think first of all, they go to this local representative, this local mayor, or each village has their representative of their local government. I mean briefly, they go to this local government and try to handle this problem here. so in the...so for example if something happens in Keda, they want to first of all, to discuss this with their local...not in Batumi, or who they have in Keda, in this region, the local representative, and then in Batumi...so Batumi is more of a center for them, so all of these municipalities have their local representative and maybe for them, I mean this sakrebulo and this mayor are their main things for this local...

Logan: ok, and uh, do you think that this person would kind of represent them, I mean would it be a Muslim person, you think or would it be, err, like um...

Tatia: Christian?

Logan: ...well yea

Tatia: maybe they have some Muslims...but do you know this case that in, uh, Adjara has its own government or something...19:42 autonomous! yea and there some or one of the men or someone was elected from the Muslim community and Georgians protested this, and now this man maintains his post there and these Georgians protested, Christians protested this, a lot! but I mean on the local level I mean the local sakrebulo in Keda or something, maybe they have but I'm not sure, you know one interesting thing happened on my, while having interview with some of the...members of patriots alliance, patriots alliance is the political party which is pro-Russian.

Logan: ah, yea, I've heard of them.

Tatia: and they are in the parliament, this patriots alliance is in the parliament and they are very pro-Russian and many people...so these young people and mainly Georgians who want

this western development or something, of course they hate this patriots alliance... We had an interview there with them and one of the interesting thing, so one man was very interesting, he was a teacher from Khulo, who came in Batumi to meet us there and he said something like this that, he tries to make this patriots alliance office stronger in Khulo, and he said something like this that he tries to explain this patriots alliance...so every time they speak about this Christianity and how this religion is very important, Christianity is very important for Georgia, but he said he was Muslim, this man from Khulo, and he told us that...how much he tries to persuade these local people who are Muslims to not pay attention to this patriot alliance that Christianity is important and join the party and support the party, that we are all Georgians and we should not differentiate people according to their religiosity. Ok and this party leaders and think that Christianity is very important, but you should not pay attention to this because being Georgian is more important than religiosity. And he was Muslim who was this man who was a representative of this patriot's alliance. So you will...so this is just one case but you will see a lot of interesting things like this, maybe this happens in the other parties (parts?) I don't know.

Logan: yea, ok interesting, are there...22:28 so in like, Adjara for example ...there aren't any different political parties, right? it's all just Georgian Dream or UNM? or patriot alliance? are there any other?

Tatia: yea! there should have been some other parties...European Georgia...some parties, but these regional offices are really weak generally, especially in the mountains, so for example in Telavi, in Batumi, there are some parties and they really work, but in Khulo and in higher than Khulo, they...the parties are weak, they don't have offices or something, they have just someone who is maybe a member of a party who probably works and just before the elections tries to persuade other people to vote for them or something.

Logan: ok, so it's more of like a...err, elections are more of like a personal kind of level ok.

Tatia: yea! yea, exactly.

Logan: ok, um...23:33 So I wanted to go back to um, how you were talking about how the, um the government doesn't really want to anger anybody. Do you happen to have any idea of maybe why they wouldn't, like why don't they enforce the law as you said, why...why are they trying to please everybody?

Tatia: Because, because of one thing, that they don't want to lose power. And in Georgia it was just once when the government was changed by the election...so elections here are very important, every time this GD tries to attract more and more votes and that's why. So and, you, you know, we are the kind of people who elect the president with 96% of the overall votes, so the leaders are very important here and I want this tendency to be changed and I would like this to be changed but...at present it is very true...not to lose votes and not to lose support, this is Whats very important...on the parliamentary election of 2016, GD got constitutional majority in parliament so they...and they changed the constitution, and in 2017, they...there was a local election and on the local level, all of these seats were taken by GD, most of the seats, in all the sakrebulo and everywhere...in the presidential election, we elected this GD...so she was an independent, but supported by GD, so it was a lie, so she

was not independent, this Zurabishvili. And now...during these demonstrations, do you know what I was thinking about?...we had bi election a month ago and in Tbilisi Mtatsminda there was a parliamentary bi election, and including in Khulo there was a bi election, in many regions so we elected some of the members of sakrebulo and mayors of different regions, so more than around...maybe 10 places there was this bi election. So in every place GD won, in all of these places and now in a month, we are having these demonstrations...this is controversial, like we elect GD people and at the same time we don't want GD in the government and we have these demonstrations, so it's strange but the election is going on and in the elections GD works very well, they have coordinators and try to mobilize their voters and these different problems are actual, so it's really, really hard situation.

Logan: oh, wow, ok 26:40 would you say this is um...did this similar situation happen with UNM? or...it's a similar kind of culture...a similar kind of trend of..

Tatia: yes...

Logan: trying to get full majority

Tatia: yea, it is absolutely the same because UNM also had this constitutional majority, and so GD took the same path, it's a tendency.

Logan: ah ok, so it's not something unique to Georgian Dream...

Tatia: yea

Logan: it's just they happen to be in power now...ok...27:33Â so what kind of...and this might be a difficult question, but what, what do you think would be necessary to...to change it...like, um...so, obviously you want more, or everyone would want the government to follow the constitution, to be, to you know, have more competition, to be more uh, I guess more of a liberal democracy, how do you think this might happen? um, err do you have any ideas of how this might happen...

Tatia: yea, I really, I have thought a lot about this and I have my own recipe or something. So here, in Georgia I think that poverty is the major problem and I think that when this poverty will be caught and dealt, we will have more...we will...so...this problem, this kind of problem will be automatically solved by themselves. Because when, so poverty...in the regions, and even in Tbilisi, so I took part in the uh, research, so before the bi-election of Mtatsminda with some students and me were included, were involved in the sociological research investigating the problems of Mtatsminda, of people living in Mtatsminda district and you know, this is a part of Tbilisi, which is very central and property is very expensive there, and you can't imagine how poor people are, even on Mtatsminda, in the center of Tbilisi, and I'm pretty sure that in the suburbs and in other places the situation is worse and maybe...you can't feel this because I think that even in the cafes the same people go, so generally people are very poor and I visited one village in the municipality of Kobuleti and I visited the school there and students told me that this was the classroom of Geography, and there were no maps, no globes, nothing in the, in their room. There was just one globe for the room, and I asked them if they used this globe to see the ocean or to see the other

countries and they said no because it is broke and damaged and the teachers did not let them to use this. Can you imagine this? So, I think that poverty is the major problem and when this will be caught, I think that...and people have opportunities, this kind of things will become better...probably.

Logan: ok, interesting...30:52 so you answered this whenever we first got here but I was going to ask like, do you think it's going to get better, or do you think it's getting worse, like just the kind of...these issues, so like as they are now, where do you see them going?

Tatia: hmm, I think that still it's very slowly, but things are becoming better, I think. Life is better now than 10 or 15 years ago, there was no...institutions and things like this before UNM and really UNM started really well like they created this...state institutions and things and now under GD, I really think that what happened this last, yesterday, not the day before, yesterday, this force and this beating was...under this government people really feel free to speak up their minds, more than UNM, but, you know, we really need to think about this recent event because it was violent and this was something that UNM was criticized for and GD did the same, but till now really people feel more free. and I think that this civil society is more...is a bit stronger than under UNM, and people still...but on the other hand this lari is sinking, a lot...compared to the dollar, I'm pretty sure you know this, the dollar is becoming more and more expensive here and our currency...we have this problem...

Logan: yea, like the currency is weakening...

Tatia: yea, and prices are becoming more expensive, all the goods and it's really hard for people, and economically people maybe feel a bit worse, but still I want to believe that things are going forward, but really living here is really...did you know one of the foreigners...I met a guy from the university of Amsterdam and he told me something a little bit disappointing, that Georgia is very interesting country, very good country, he told me, but Georgia is very good for two things. What are these two things I asked, and he said: its traveling and conducting research...and not for living! ...it's hard, but I do believe things will be better. and I am happy that this young generation, feel free and they are more courageous. Many people go abroad and come back and get the education and they want to use this here in Georgia and I think this will really influence things.

Logan: alright um, I think...yea that's everything...

#### Interview 4

Interviewee: Sophie Zviadadze PhD

Interviewer: Logan Hulsey

Logan: ok so um hello um, could you start by telling me um what is your expertise in this area

Sophie: In Adjara or...

Logan: yes, in Adjara

Sophie: or in particular in the mosque issue

Logan: oh, uh just Adjara

Sophie: so, when I started researching Adjara the main question of my research was to investigate the transformation of religiosity after independence...after the collapse of the Soviet Union and what happens to Muslim identity or Muslim religiosity. but after my third research I have discovered that the main problem of Muslim Adjarans are acknowledgement from Georgian society of their identity as full Georgians and this religious identity was the second level and the first was on what they always mention was that we are full Georgians, we are Georgians we are not Tatars we are not Turks, they always make these border line between Georgian and turkey...we are Georgians. but they have some particular cohesion from Muslim identity and Georgianness because you know that the main trend or main narrative of Georgian national identity is that being Georgian means being Christian, and so parallel to these narratives they feel very comfortable with this identity but they feel somehow marginality(?) because they think of these two perceptions or that these two identities have no contradictions and they always. They waiting that Georgian Christian society will accept that they're Muslim identity. and that new mosque construction is one of the crucial issues because it is for Adjarans, Muslim Adjarans some sign if they will construct this new mosque it means that they have acceptance and that's why it is not only uh religious issue that this Orta Jami this old mosque is not sufficient and they need another mosque but at the same time these building of the new mosque has so social and so cultural meaning that it means acceptance of Muslims and acceptance of freedom of religion and what I have mentioned for me is that somehow test for society and for state because there is no such a reason why Muslims could not build this mosque because by law and by constitution they have such a rights but there is only bureaucratic technical hinderances that uh and uh its reflects that they are afraid. So, I know some of the politicians in Adjara told me that when we give them such a permission the Adjaran and Christian population against and that will start a riot, protest rally and they are afraid at the same time they use this issue in pre-election campaigns, they always promise Muslim minorities that please after election we will give you this permission, it's such an issue for political games. So and also maybe it interesting too that in also Georgian orthodox church plays a very important role because this discourse that um

mosque have no place in Georgian territory or in Adjara and Adjara is Christian land this discourse is promoted by Georgian orthodox church and it is especially in Adjara that they have such a narrative that Adjara was the first place that Christianity was brought to Georgia from apostle adios(?) apostle Andrea(?) has first time preaching about Christianity and so for the church this part of Georgia has additional meaning that first Christian part of Georgia. and it's become stronger among this narrative stronger among Christian Adjarans and maybe you know they have such a petition against not to build this church and several rallies in Adjara. But maybe it is interesting for you how it changes its protest discourse because in 90s after independence nobody knows there is Muslims that Muslims want another mosque even, I would say that most of Georgians do not know that Adjarans are Muslims and if they are practicing this till today. In 2009 when there was this partitive(?) agreement between Turkey and Georgia, it was the first time when Georgia society discovered that oh Adjarans are Muslim and turkey will build a mosque. and I think it was this time when perception of this mosque was connected with turkey was constructed and when today this community, Muslim Adjarans say that we will construct this mosque with our own funding, without donation from turkey. society has this picture that turkey will build this and even this connection with these names, Azizye mosque even this mosque will have no such a name et cetera but in this time there was a lot of Turkophobic sentiment and sentences and it's still alive and many people use this discourse what was constructed in 2009 and you know this agreement was cancelled.

08:46 Logan: ok interesting so would you say that um a lot of the pushback from the Adjara community is it like anti-Turkish or anti Muslim, would you say? like or is it kind of both

Sophie: whether they are against turkey or

Logan: yes

Sophie: ah ok

Logan: so, like when people protest against these uh the Muslim people building this mosque is it because, is it an anti-Turkish thing or is it an anti-Muslim thing.

09:22 Sophie: I think Turkey is the main enemy in this discourse, but um so in this day its connected with the anti-Islamic and Islamophobic sentiments too but in Adjara, so in Adjara it's mostly anti turkey sentiments and its even. I think it's also interesting that no only Christian Adjarans have this Turkophobic sentiment even Muslim Adjarans. It's very interesting because they accept that they are Muslims but they want not to have such a historical or cultural religious tie with turkey. I think it's why they want to be connected with Georgia. and they are afraid that if we have such a positive connection or acceptance of turkey, they are Georgianness will be under question maybe. but you could not show any difference between Christian or Muslim Adjara when they are speaking on turkey. both communities are saying that turkey has a lot of business and they have occupied our territory, I mean territory for business. so, there is no difference.



11:15 Logan: um, ok so I guess, I wanted to ask, what is it that people are afraid of, of turkey exactly, I mean so I understand that turkey has a lot of influence in Adjara meaning that they have a lot of businesses and stuff and um you know Islam and stuff, what is people are afraid are they afraid that turkey is going to take it back or something, I mean

11:49 Sophie: so um I think this issue should be researched very deeply and its very broad because I think behind all these Turkophobic or Islamophobic tendencies is another reason why they are so xenophobic, I think first of all that they have discovered that everything in Adjara and in particular Batumi is deeply changing and its economically and social and what are they think that all this business, casinos, and such owners are people from turkey and they see that what are they own casinos or restaurants and I think that these over, how to say, a lot of foreigners in Adjara, but turkey is the most presented and this historical connection with ottoman empire and from on the one hand Adjarans want to forget these connections, and on the other hand they see that turkey is once again in Adjara and they want. it's so...economical and historical memories and they want to be separated from these countries. they use...they have a lot of benefits from turkey, they are working in turkey and they have even benefitted in Adjara. but I think that this economical changing is linked with this cultural perception that turkey is other country and they. so I...it should not be separated, this cultural memory and this current times is turkey as rich man who has everything in Adjara and I think there is statistical data where it shows that not turkey but Russia and Azerbaijan have most properties, but it is in reality, but Adjarans have another perception, but statistical data shows another picture but in the city they do not see Russians, they see Russians as tourists, only tourists, but they do not know that they own more property than Turkish people. So...

Logan: ok

Sophie: I think that they will always have a differentiation in perception of enemies, they will preserve this picture of turkeys, but my own view is that I think this Turks as enemies very modern phenomenon, even it has for Adjarans its connected with history but turkey as an enemy is very modern and they, so they need someone who is responsible for this economical changes and very rapid, so its raising this social um inequality and they see that turkey is responsible for these changes.

Logan: right, ok interesting ok...um and then I also want to talk about the orthodox church for a minute, so these kind of anti-Turkish, like these these...who is kind of perpetuating these feelings of like anti-Turkish, I mean like you said people kind of perceive the Turks as the ones who are building, I mean is there somebody that's like pushing these feelings, I mean who keeps perpetuating this?

16:59 Sophie: so I think that in, after 2009 when this agreement, there were negotiations between Georgia and turkey and Georgian, so...Georgian orthodox church was against this agreement and that's why this negotiation was annulled and cancelled, since this time I think Georgian orthodox church was such an institution who has transferred these economical changes, or these Turks as enemies and have connected this with ottoman empire because first time we hear from church that these mosque new mosque will be a sign or symbol of ottoman empire and it was so added that there was such a, there was

always such a, I won't say Turkophobic but some envy it may be said that they have more capital in Adjara so, but it was not so it has not cultural and religious dimension, and I think it was Georgian orthodox church who have added this facet to this issue, but in current time I think this ultra-radical groups, sort of far right groups and its nowadays difficult to distinguish who uses, they use...this new mosque is very fruitful issue for radical groups and they instrumentalize it always, show turkey will build this mosque and nowadays its mostly far right groups have this Turkophobic sentiment and aim...to help Georgians, it's always Adjara, we should help Adjara and turkey from turkey and they use this ottoman, even this word was not used in 90s, it was turkey, but...Turkophobic discourse comes from....remembering that ottoman empire was fighting with Georgia etc. and these groups are using these historical menace and mostly fake news, or fake news information but it's connected to religious and national sentiments, but 90s and 2000s church was also who has this main discourse and Turkophobic views and now it's more pluralistic I would say, everyone uses it.

20:51 Logan: ok um but would you say is the church still kind of perpetuating this today?

20:57 Sophie: yes!

Logan: and it's just kind of added on by

21:02 Sophie: yes, in Adjara, particularly in Adjara because...priests in Adjara are preaching till today that Adjara should return to Georgia, should Christianize should and they are main actors who are against mosque because all rally, protest rallies were conducted by priests.

21:27 Logan: ok um, now you said that...this, even in the 90s this didn't really happen very much, is this a new thing where the church wants to Christianize...

Sophie: and church has become also stronger in the 90s it was, it had not such an influence and its

Logan; ok so tis because the...would you say it's because the church has gotten stronger it's kind of...

Sophie: I think both, because it...this...um...Adjara comes on political platform of government when nobody was discussing Adjara, it was some political issues that this autonomous republic was semi- autocratic,

Logan: ah yea until like 2004?

Sophie: yes that's why...Aslan Abashidze was governing and he was dealing with priests with muftis, so he was a quasi-authoritarian and we did not know what happens and in this time it was um also he was dealing with this with some quasi negotiation but after that after the rose revolution that means that this is open question Muslims need new mosque and state has, state was morally bound, so I remember Saakashvili said that we should build this mosque but society was against this and they were afraid that people will protest and they remain so.

Logan: ok um interesting so...23:27 so I'm interested in how you said that the church's power is growing, is it growing there in particular or is it just kind of growing in Georgia as a whole?

Sophie: in Georgia

23:41 Logan: ok um like would you say that it started to grow after the rose revolution?

Sophie: um, I would say...

Logan: is it related...

Sophie I would say after rose revolution it's a more obvious but I would say after Shevardnadze because Shevardnadze was uh so first politician who in public debates who accepted the role of the church and always mentioned that we should accept patriarchal what patriarch said, it so last instance, etc. so I would say that this loyalty is a connection between state and church began since Shevardnadze time, but after rose revolution, it was more obvious in various spheres and it was...I would say it was a competition because state wanted some autonomy on several spheres but has no chance because church was very, has a very high authority and especially when it refers to cultural heritage and religious issues so and...

25:15 Logan: hm, ok, now this next question might sound like an obvious question but, what is the church's I guess intention in Adjara, I mean like is it their intention to just Christianize all of the Adjarans, you know what I mean I mean their fantasy goal is it for them to Christianize all the Adjarans...

Sophie: mmmhm [in agreement]

Logan ...is it so they can increase their influence there

Sophie: yes I...I think so because, yes, first of all is the Christianizing and um while Georgian orthodox church...um Christianity or religious issues is linked with nationality for Georgian orthodox church too so and more church perceived for Georgian society as some strong holder or some defender of national identity and for church is for some kind of missionary work and is Christianizing and at the same time preserving nationality so I think it has a religious and national meaning too, so that's why in early 90s Georgian orthodox church sent priests in Adjara in this time church and patriarch has not so authority as today, but they began this new life after independence in Adjara and preaching Christianity and you should return...uh they use this word return, that we are Christians and we should return to Christianity and uh it means a lot for whole Georgian and uh Christianity in Georgia so ...and it's all this till today.

27:31 Logan: ok, um ok yea I think that was everything all the questions I had

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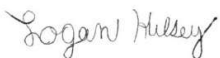
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