“Legacies of the Past: Nationalism and Islam in Post-Soviet Georgia”

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“Legacies of the Past:
Nationalism and Islam
in Post-Soviet Georgia”

by

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Abstract

In the late 20th century it was thought that religion and idea of nation-state would disappear from the scene of world politics. However, the contrary process took place and neither the idea of the nation nor of the religion has disappeared. This thesis aims to examine complex history of Islam in Georgia and recent trends in the development of nationalism and the rise of the religious affiliations amongst both Christian and Muslim Georgians. Consequently, this thesis explores the existing narratives about Georgian Muslims and finds that the notion of ‘Georgianness’ is linked to Orthodox Christianity and that this idea has a long history.

Keywords: Islam, Nationalism, Georgian Orthodox Church, Soviet Union, Post-Soviet era, religious minority, institutions
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I am thankful for the patience, care and understanding that my friends gave me throughout this one-year endeavor. They were attentive listeners to my hour-long stories about Georgia and its culture and history.

Infinite gratitude and love goes to my family who believed in this undertaking of mine and who were and are the most critical readers of the work. Without your tremendous belief this work would not be completed. Maka, Nino, Giorgi and Alexandra, I dedicate this thesis to you!
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### Glossary of terms

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<td><strong>AMAG</strong></td>
<td>Administration of Muslims of All Georgia (also referred to as Samufo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>chadri</strong></td>
<td>veil, almost totally covering the female body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GOC</strong></td>
<td>Georgian Orthodox Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GMU</strong></td>
<td>Georgian Muslims Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>intelligentsia</strong></td>
<td>the group of intellectuals regarded as possessing culture and political initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>korenizatsia or nativization</strong></td>
<td>refers to the Communist party’s policies of the 1920s, in which the nationality of the non-Russians was promoted via state policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>madrassa</strong></td>
<td>Islamic school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meskheti</strong></td>
<td>This is a historic toponym of Samtskhe-Javakheti region in the south of Georgia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mkhedrioni</strong></td>
<td>Paramilitary group in Georgia in the late 1980s-1990s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>mufti</strong></td>
<td>The head of the muftiate or Muslim council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>muhajiroba</strong></td>
<td>The migration of Georgian Muslims to the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NKVD</strong></td>
<td>Soviet secret police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>nomenklatura</strong></td>
<td>a list of influential posts in government and industry which were filled by Communist Party appointees. Members of <em>nomenklatura</em> had special right and privileges within Soviet system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sjuli</strong></td>
<td>Georgian word which denotes ethnoreligious identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>waqf, or vaqf</strong></td>
<td>Islamic endowment</td>
</tr>
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1. Introduction

“If I am a Muslim, why cannot I be Georgian?” - This is the question that was raised by a Laz teacher\(^1\) during one of the discussions with the students. He would usually dedicate some time from the lessons to the melancholic dialogues about the path of Georgia and the role of Georgian Muslims in that path. During one of the first encounters, he spoke about the traditions and customs of the Laz people, who were influenced by both Christianity and Islam. This merge of cultures and religions became an inspiration for this thesis.

The main aim of this research is to discover whether ‘Georgianness’ was and is linked with Orthodox religion? And what is the image of Georgian Muslims in the contemporary Georgian society?

One might argue that these questions are mainly of local importance. However, this is not the case as, nowadays, the world is witnessing the growth of nationalism not only in the Post-Soviet countries but also in the different parts of the globe. The world, and even more so Georgia, is a place, where “religion has become a privileged resource of social and cultural construction”\(^2\).

Recent study of the Pew Research Center underlined the role of religion in the identity building processes of Central and Eastern European states. Across these countries, a median of 66% of the population considered that belonging to the official or favored faith is “very or somewhat important to national identity”\(^3\). More than that, in June 2018, the Pew Research Center published the results of the study, the main goal of which was to examine religiosity of the younger generation. The analysis of 106 countries found that Georgia and Ghana are the only two countries, where younger

\(^1\)These are the words of Tsate Batsashi, who was my teacher at Free University of Tbilisi from 2016 to 2017. Laz is Kartvelian-speaking ethnic group inhabiting the Black Sea coastal regions of Turkey and Georgia

\(^2\) Alexander Agadjanian, Ansgar Jödicke, and Evert Van De Zweerde, Religion, nation and democracy in the South Caucasus (London & New York: Routledge, 2017), 26

\(^3\) Katayoun Kishi and Kesley Jo Starr. Many Central and Eastern Europeans see link between religion and national identity, URL (Accessed Nov 17, 2017)
generation is more religious than the elder one\textsuperscript{4}. It is argued in the thesis that this religiosity, along with the rise of far-right nationalist sentiments, is partially the rudiment of the Soviet era (see \textsuperscript{2.5. Soviet Union and its policies}).

With this in mind, the research question for this thesis is proposed as: \textbf{to what extent (if at all) is Orthodox religion part of national identity of Georgians and how this affects the Georgian Muslim community}? More specifically, the author would like to dwell on what has replaced the Soviet ideology in the post-Soviet era in Georgia and how (or whether at all) does this new ideology envision the role of Georgian Muslims in the state-building process? According to this post-Soviet ideology, is being Muslim compatible with being Georgian?

Georgia is predominantly Orthodox Christian country with 10.7\% of its population being Muslim. Out of this 10.7\%, 65.7\% are ethnically Azerbaijanis and 31.7\% are Georgian, living primarily in Ajara\textsuperscript{5} and Samtskhe-Javakheti (also known as Meskheti) regions (see Figure 1).

\textit{Figure 1. The map of Georgia with Ajara and Meskheti (Samtskhe-Javakheti) regions}\textsuperscript{6}

One would assume that Georgia as a country which proclaims adherence to liberal values and considers itself as a country with European heritage\textsuperscript{7} would have more inclusive policies towards its ethnic and religious minorities. However, in this thesis it


\textsuperscript{5} Ajara region’s name is spelled in a number of ways, including Adjara, Ajaria, Adjaria, Adzharia, Atchara and Achara, Acharia.

\textsuperscript{6} Ajara and Meskheti regions marked in red on the map of Georgia. Archives.Gov.Ge URL: \url{http://www.archives.gov.ge/ge/saqartvelos-rukebi} (accessed May 2, 2018)

\textsuperscript{7}After the Rose Revolution of 2004, Georgia’s political elite has positioned itself as pro-European and more specifically pro-EU. The country was recognized an associate state-member of the EU in June 2014. For more detail see “EU/Georgia Association Agreement” \url{URL}:
will be examined to what extent this vision of self does/does not correspond with the reality and whether Muslim populations is viewed as a challenge to the nation-building process.

The main focus of this research is on Sunni Muslims of Georgia who are ethnically Georgians. When it comes to religious groups, Georgia is not a homogenous country: there are Georgian Orthodox Christians; Georgian Sunni and Shia Muslims; non-Georgian Sunni and Shia Muslims (mostly of Azerbaijani descent); Apostolic Armenians; Yezidis; Orthodox Greeks. The scope of this paper does not allow to include the analysis of all the groups mentioned above. Thus, the cases of Georgian Muslims of Ajara and Meskheti (Samtshke-Javakheti) region will be the main focus of this paper. In the recent years, these communities (especially Ajara region) experienced number of transformation, which included re-Islamization, and re-Christianization of the population along with the rise of radical Orthodox nationalism. The effect of these processes will be examined in this research.

This thesis aims to expand the scope of the existing literature on the question of nationalism and Islam in Georgia and make a new contribution to the academic literature, which builds on the post-Soviet identity of Georgia and how this identity envisions Georgian Muslims. Predominantly the literature that examines the question of Islam in Georgia, focus on Ajara region. However, this thesis aims to combine literature on both Ajaran Muslims and Meskhetian Muslims and compare (when possible) the effect of the state policies on the communities living in these two regions.

In the first chapter, the relevance of the topic and the existing literature on nationalism, identity, and Islam in Georgia is presented. In this part the gap in the literature is defined and it is shown how this thesis aims to fill in this scholarly gap. Additionally, research methods used in analyzing data for the thesis are outlined.

The second chapter examines historical accounts on the spread and development of Islam and nationalism in Georgia. This historical analysis embarks on the period starting from the late 19th century with more profound focus on the 20th-century Soviet ethnic and religious policies that led to the creation of current unresolved tensions. In the

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chapter, the aim is to illustrate how the nationalism, which would dominate political scene of the late 1980s-1990s and would survive up to today, was nurtured within the Soviet system.

Chapter three builds on the Post-Soviet reality in Georgia and along with the outline of historical processes of the post-1991, it includes the analysis of the existing narratives about and within Georgian Muslim community, supported by the conducted elite interviews.

The following concepts will be addressed whilst addressing the research question (what is the relationship between the new state ideology in Georgia and the role of Georgian Muslims in the state-building process?): what is a nation? What are religious and ethnic nationalisms and how they are expressed in Georgia’s case? How is the identity linked to Christian Orthodoxy?

1.1 Literature review

To develop a strong analytical framework it is necessary to engage with the literature on nationalism, nation-building, religion, and national and religious identities formation in the context of multiethnic and multi-religious societies in order to see what are the best suitable frameworks to explain the question of Islam in Georgia and its interaction with Georgian Orthodox Christianity.

In order to examine nationalism in its different forms, it is necessary to understand the use of the category ‘nation’, which is viewed in this thesis from the constructivist stance. If in the past historians and political scientists believed, that nations were as ‘old as history’, in the last decades scholars like Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson, and Rogers Brubaker emphasized the recent history of nation and nationalism. They do not consider nation as a primordial principle that existed throughout the history of the humankind. Interestingly, when referring to Georgian nation, Georgian public usually speaks about it in the prehistoric terms: in one of the conducted interviews, the respondent said, “Georgian nation was there even before Christianity”\(^9\). In this regard the nation is not viewed as ‘invention’ but rather as primordial element. This flawed interpretation of history constitutes a nation, argues Ernst Renan who asserted, “Getting

\(^9\) Interview with Beglar Kamashidze, 91
history wrong is a part of being a nation”\textsuperscript{10}. Throughout the thesis, these moments of flawed interpretation of history in the context of the relationship of religious majority with religious minority will be closely examined.

All the aforementioned authors do not look at both nation and nationalism as permanent unchanging social entity. It is not nations that create nationalism and states, but the other way around\textsuperscript{11}. Besides, in the recent years the social theory more frequently looks at nation as a “constructed, contingent, and fluctuating” social structure\textsuperscript{12}. This thesis would approach the nation from the perspective of constructivists and will look at the nation as ‘imagined community’. Benedict Anderson conceptualized this term and underlined the importance of the feeling of the people of being engaged in constructing a community and belonging together. This thesis will analyze, how in Georgia’s case this right of ‘belonging’ is given to the people who adhere to Orthodox religion and how this approach excludes other religious and ethnic minorities.

When reflecting on the question of nation and nationalism, the scholarly work of Ernest Gellner is the first that comes to mind. In his view, nations are formations, which are brought together by modern means of communication and education. Gellner and other constructivists (primarily Anderson and Hobsbawm) argue that education “has the ability to disseminate ‘high culture’ and has always been seen as means of nation-building […] it disseminates the ideas and views of how a nation should be constructed”\textsuperscript{13}. The third chapter will closer elaborate on the role of education (with the influence of the Georgian Orthodox Church) in tying the nation-building process with Christian religion.

As for defining nationalism, it could be defined as “a principle that holds that the political and national unit should be congruent”\textsuperscript{14}. In the contemporary political science,

there are many types of nationalism. In regard to Georgian Muslims, the occurrence and consequences of religious nationalism and ethnic nationalism will be analyzed. One could say that ethnic nationalism is less relevant as Georgian Muslims are viewed as ethnically Georgian. However, ethnic nationalism is based on “membership through genetic and cultural inheritance”\(^ {15}\). Because of converting to Islam, Georgian Muslims are sometimes subjected to both religious and ethnic nationalism, which applies to them because of them being outside of the ‘main’ Orthodox group and “not quite full members of a nation”\(^ {16}\). Whilst analyzing religious nationalism, it is important to note the role that institutions (be it religious or political) play in shaping it. Roger Friedland asserted that religion is not only a doctrine or set of myths, but it is “an institutional space according to whose logic religious nationalists wish to remake the world”\(^ {17}\).

Within the academic work on the religion and religious nationalism, much attention has been devoted to the rise of the religious factor and its influence on politics. In this regard rationalist approach has received criticism as religion has neither declined nor disappeared within time. The globalization, which contributed to sense of insecurity and uncertainty, challenged “protective framework of smaller communities and their traditions”, which is more than relevant in Georgia’s case too\(^ {18}\). The rise of nationalism and religion occurred because these two ‘identity-signifiers’, “supply particularly powerful stories and beliefs because of their ability to convey a picture of security, stability, and simple answers”\(^ {19}\). Interestingly, while referring to the South Caucasus region, Alexander Agadjanian speaks neither of pure ethnic or pure religious nationalism, but denotes it as religious ethno-nationalism thus emphasizing the process of including “the grand narratives of perennial religious identity” in the official political discourse\(^ {20}\).


\(^{16}\) Ibid.


This inclusion of the majority religion in the politics is shown in Article 9 of Georgian Constitution of 1995, which along with recognizing freedom of religion recognizes a ‘special role’ of Georgian Orthodox Church in the history of Georgian state.

I would like to define the main studies that cover the question of religion, nationalism and Islamic practices in Georgia. There is a multitude of studies, which approach these topics from a sociological, political and historical perspective. In order to understand this topic more profoundly, the works of anthropologists like Tamta Khalvashi\textsuperscript{21}, Ketevan Gurchiani\textsuperscript{22}, and Mathijs Pelkmans will be examined\textsuperscript{23}. These scholars conducted a fieldwork in Georgia in different time-periods and studied the growth of religious Orthodox nationalism and its effects on Georgian Muslims. Other than examining contemporary situation, they also give the historical overview of the question showing Russian Imperial and Soviet Union religious policies (which sometimes carried similarities) shaped today’s ‘Muslim question’ in Georgia.

1.2 Research Methods

In order to analyze the complexity of the situation regarding the image of Georgian Muslims in the contemporary Georgian society, several research methods will be used. The main emphasis is given to the qualitative methods (especially in-depth semi-structured interviews), rather than quantitative ones as the former provide richer and more contextual description of the events and social processes. According to Roger Pierce, qualitative research is well suited for gaining profound knowledge and explaining the complexities of social and political life. In-depth interviewing, which is one of the types of qualitative research, allows to “learn and understand the underlying values of individuals and groups”\textsuperscript{24}. This is the reason why this method was actively applied in this research. However, interviewing is used in conjunction with other methods such as

\textsuperscript{21} Khalvashi, Tamta. Peripheral Affects: Shame, Publics, And Performance on the Margins of the Republic of Georgia. Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Copenhagen, Department of Anthropology, 2015
\textsuperscript{24} Pierce, Roger. Research Methods in Politics. Sage Publications, 2008: 45
historical analysis and discourse analysis. Further, it is explained why these particular research methods were chosen.

1.2.1 Historical analysis: rethinking the past

Historical research has two main approaches, one of which follows German school and the other French school of thought: the former acquires constructionist approach to history, which “focuses on change or continuity over time, and the specific contexts, geographies, events, and times where this change or continuity took place”\(^{25}\). On the other hand, followers of the latter approach, take positivist stance in their analysis of history, which aims at “verifying collected data and using the data to interpret and present causal evidence”\(^{26}\). The author agrees with the first group and argues that in the turbulent times; people find refuge and explanation of the ongoing processes in the past. This is particularly true for Georgian case. According to Ketevan Gurchiani in contemporary Georgia, “while switching between the past, present, and future, people reorient toward the past in certain circumstances, which seems the most relevant”\(^{27}\). The advantage of the historical analysis as a method is in the fact that it allows to investigate and to explore the past, to establish a context and/or background of societal and political processes. It would be wrong to say that the present repeats the past in its exact form, however, what it does instead is it reshapes the past and takes some aspects of it while incorporating it in the contemporary situation. This idea will be further elaborated in the thesis.

Another reason behind choosing historical analysis as a method for this research is Besides, as Michael Moissey Postan has noted, the fact that the social scientists, along with using anthropological and statistical data, frequently refer to the historical evidence for explaining general tendencies of the past, which shape the society. Postan argues,


\(^{26}\) Ibid.

\(^{27}\) Gurchiani, Ketevan. "Georgia In-between: Religion in Public Schools." \textit{Nationalities Papers} 45, no. 6 (2017): 1110
“there is no disagreement about the need and the possibility of employing social evidence, including historical evidence, for theoretical purposes”\textsuperscript{28}.

Though history, as a science, face number of criticism (including lack of general rules), one might claim that what people call history, the way they see and interpret it, defines their present. This research will attempt to trace this observation in Georgia’s case.

1.2.2 Discourse analysis: exploring systems of meanings

Discourse analysis as a research method has many interpretations. Within the social sciences discourse can be interpreted in a variety of ways. For example, it can be defined as\textsuperscript{29}:

- Social practice determined by social structures
- Systems of meaning
- “A representation of what we want the world to be like, rather than a representation of how the world is”
- “A specific ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorizations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meanings are given to [...] social realities”.

The term discourse itself was conceptualized by Michel Foucault, which became a pillar point of his theoretical arguments and of his arguments. Discourse refers to “groups of statements that structure the way a thing is thought, and the way we act on the basis of that thinking”\textsuperscript{30}. In other words, discourse constitutes knowledge about the world, which irreversibly shapes the way the world is looked at and understood.

This research will highlight the way systems of meanings are created and how they define how people look at ‘themselves’ and at ‘others’. In particular, the roots of the discourse of Georgian Muslims being Tatar will be traced and it will be examined whether this thinking is still present amongst Georgian public. Moreover, the discourse of


\textsuperscript{29} Pierce, Roger. \textit{Research Methods in Politics}. Sage Publications, 2008: 280

Georgian Muslims being ‘superficial’ Muslims will be studied. Georgian academia and Georgian society frequently refer to Islam in Ajara as of something that was forcibly imposed on them and something that did not resonate in the population, which tried to safeguard the Christian religious practices of the ‘forefathers’ even under the Ottoman rule. This discourse of ‘superficial Islam’, which has little or no support from historical facts, shapes the public opinion and leads to the discursive formation that defines how the reality is understood and interpreted.

1.2.3 Interviewing

Semi-structured interviews were chosen because it allows both, researcher and respondent, to deviate from the main line of questions in order to further “explore meanings and areas of interest that emerge” during the discussion. Guidelines for conducting interviews, were taken from “Interviewing for Social Scientists” by Hilary Arksey and Peter T. Knight and in “Social Research: A Practical Introduction” by Bruce Curtis and Cate Curtis. In this research, facial expressions, emotional tone and body language of respondents were taken into account along with the content of posed questions and received answers.

With all this in mind, five in-depth interviews were conducted with the respondents, whose backgrounds are presented in the Figure 1. Main topic of these interviews was related to the questions of (1) national and religious identity, (2) the rise of nationalist sentiments and (3) the Soviet and post-Soviet experiences regarding (1) and(2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Method of Interview</th>
<th>Length of the interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tariel Nakaidze</td>
<td>Chairman of Georgian Muslims’ Union</td>
<td>≈ 45 years old</td>
<td>In person</td>
<td>64 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father Maxime (Murtaz Chanturia)</td>
<td>Orthodox Priest; Professor at Tbilisi State Seminary</td>
<td>≈ 50 years old</td>
<td>Face-to-face video call</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurie Abashidze</td>
<td>Female Muslim woman; Currently MA student at</td>
<td>25 years old</td>
<td>Face-to-face video call</td>
<td>57 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

32 Ibid
33 Curtis, Bruce, and Curtis, Cate. *Social Research: A Practical Introduction*. 2011
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Mathijs Pelkmans</strong></th>
<th>Ilia State University</th>
<th>Associate Professor of Anthropology at the London School of Economics. The author of the book “Defending the border: Identity, Religion, and Modernity in the Republic of Georgia”</th>
<th>45 years old</th>
<th>Face-to-face video call</th>
<th>31 minutes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beglar Kamashidze</td>
<td><strong>Mufti</strong> of the Administration of Muslims of all Georgia (AMAG)</td>
<td>≈ 45 years old</td>
<td>Face-to-face video call</td>
<td>43 minutes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was decided to introduce the respondents in this section in order for the reader to be able to relate to their opinions and to understand how the views that they hold were shaped.

The Muslim respondents - Tariel Nakaidze, Hurie Abashidze and Beglar Kamashidze share some similarities: 1) all of them are from the Upper Ajara region, which retained religiosity even when the rest of the Ajara region became more secular during the Post-Soviet time; 2) along with being devout Muslims themselves, they said that there parents and grandparents were also religious people (even during the Soviet era, when one could be persecuted for expressing religious beliefs); 3) Both Tariel, Hurie and Beglar received their education in Turkey after the fall of the Soviet Union with the difference that Tariel Nakaidze and Beglar Kamashidze received religious education and studied theology, while Hurie studied Psychology for her bachelor studies.34

In order to have the data triangulation35 and to get the perspective regarding the question of Islam in Georgia from the ‘outsiders’, I interviewed Murtaz Chanturia (Father Maxime) who is an Orthodox Priest and the professor at the Tbilisi State Seminary – and Mathijs Pelkmans – who has academic expertise of the topic and conducted a fieldwork in Ajara region in the late 1990s. Their accounts allowed exploring the same phenomenon – nationalism and Islam in Georgia – but from the different perspective.

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34 For more detailed account see Appendix, p.68
2. Historical overview

“What I am trying to do is grasp the implicit systems which determine our most familiar behavior without our knowing it. I am trying to find their origin, to show their formation, the constraint they impose upon us”.

Michel Foucault

Past provides legitimacy for the present events and this is why it is crucial to study it. This chapter aims at exploring the history of Islam in Georgia and how legacies of the past shape the contemporary socio-political situation.

The chapter will provide the analysis of the development of Islam and nationalism in Georgia within different time-periods, with closer focus on the Soviet era, because it “was precisely the Soviet experience that largely shaped the character of Georgian nationalism as it emerged during and after the Soviet collapse”37. Before looking at the Soviet ethnic and religious policies, one should trace the roots of Islam in Georgia.

2.1 Islam in Ajara region

Georgia became a unified country in the 10th century and from 11th to 13th centuries country experienced the Golden age – a time when architecture, poetry and ecclesiastic art prospered. Later, in the 15th century, Georgian kingdom was disintegrated into smaller entities because of the internal and external factors. These smaller state entities were strongly influenced by neighboring countries, especially, the rising Ottoman Empire. With the rise and expansion of the Ottoman Empire, Ajara region became fully incorporated in the Ottoman Empire and was part of it from 16th to 19th century. This led to the gradual conversion of the regional political elite and population to Islam.

When it comes to understanding the processes of Islamization of Ajara region, there are two main discourses that are present in the Georgian society: first is that the Georgian Muslims of Ajara region accepted Islam only because of the violent conversion practices of the Ottomans and due to the fear of being persecuted. Good example of it is the quote from the historical book written in 1956: “Part of the population (of Ajara region – AC) was massacred, while the rest, in order to save their lives, adopted Islam”\textsuperscript{38}. Second popular discourse asserts that even when Islamization occurred, it was superficial and did not have a significant effect on people’s lives. The first discourse will be presented and analyzed in this part of the research, while the second will be examined in the third chapter (see \textit{3.2.1 ‘Superficial Islam’ in Ajara and the narrative of ‘fake conversions’}). The latter will be compared to the phenomenon of Christianization, which took place in Post-Soviet Ajara.

There is a widely held belief among Georgian society that Georgians living in Ajara region converted to Islam because of the pressure and use of force. For example, this view was echoed by Father Maxime, who said, “for centuries Ajarans were under the Turkish rule. It is evident that they were forced to convert to Islam”\textsuperscript{39}. However, the Muslim respondent – Hurie Abashidze - disagreed with this popular belief and asserted\textsuperscript{40}:

\begin{quote}
\textit{People usually say, that converting to Islam was the only mean of survival for Ajarans as they would be killed otherwise. But if we look closer, we will see that by the time Ajarans became Muslims, it no longer was the mean for survival but it was their choice}.
\end{quote}

After the analysis of historical literature, it was found that the spread of Islam in Ajara region was more complex than one could think: the conversion from Christianity to Islam occurred at different rates and was influenced by the socioeconomic status. For example, the predominant part of Ajara’s political elite and noblemen accepted Islam relatively soon after the region was brought under the Ottoman rule. This move guaranteed the elite their political power. Besides, in the Ottoman Empire there were tax incentives for converting to Islam. However, this conversion of the political elite did not

\textsuperscript{39} Interview with Father Maxime, 75
\textsuperscript{40} Interview with Hurie Abashidze, 79
resonate amongst Ajaran peasant population mainly because, as Thomas Liles argues, (1) initially there was no tangible incentive for them to convert to Islam and (2) also cultural and administrative presence of the Ottomans was rather limited in the 17th-18th centuries41.

The change occurred in the 19th century when Islam started to penetrate in the Ajara region. As the rivalry between Ottoman and Russian Empires for the domination in the Caucasus region increased, Ajara (which back then was part of the Ottoman Empire) was considered to be ‘a strategic asset’. There were two main factors that led to the spread of Islam: (1) the economic incentives which were used by the Ottomans to develop rural areas of Ajara, (2) because of the lack of the higher education institutions in Ajara, the local nobility had to send their children for education abroad42.

The fact that elite was getting education in the Ottoman Empire and was integrated in the political system played an important role. The children of the Ajaran nobility often received their religious schooling in Turkey and other Muslim countries and as a result, “the clerical elite tended to have a pro-Turkish orientation”,43. The Ottoman Empire put incentives for the inclusion of Ajaran elite in its political system44. The same process could be observed with the 19th-century Georgian elite, which received education in the Russian Empire and was under its cultural and political influence.

The 19th century was the time of decline of the Ottoman Empire. It lost in the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878 ended with the Treaty of San Stefano, according to which Ajara region ceded to the Russian Empire. Batumi, Ajara’s capital, became porto franco, a port with free trade zone. Because of the high taxes and the practices of land expropriation implemented by the Russian Imperial authorities, the population of the region sold its property and immigrated to the Ottoman Empire45. The process continued

44 This is illustrated by the fact that when in 1877-1878 the war broke out between Russians and the Ottomans, from 6,000 to 10,000 Ajarans served in the Ottoman army as soldiers. See Sanikidze, George, and Edward W. Walker. "Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia." 2004: 8
45 Khalvashi, Tamta. *Peripheral Affects: Shame, Publics, Andperformance on the Margins of the Republic of Georgia*. Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Copenhagen, Department of Anthropology, 2015: 53
till the late 1880-s and was named as muhajiroba⁴⁶. Because of it, up to this day, in the provinces of Artvin, Kars, Rize, Samsun and Sinop one can find descendants of Georgian Muslims part of whom claim to belong to Georgian heritage. Other than creating a demographic problem, muhajiroba was a challenge for Georgian identity and for 19th century Georgian intelligentsia who viewed ‘returned Ajarans’ as ‘lost brothers’.

The demographic situation in the region was disastrous because of the war, economic hardship and muhajiroba. This is best shown if one looks at the population of Batumi before and after Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878. If in 1872 out of approximately 5 000 inhabitants, 4 500 were Muslim⁴⁷, in 1897 census the city’s population expanded significantly and consisted of 15,495 people – predominantly Orthodox Christians. This demographic change can be partially explained by the deliberate policies of the Russian Empire, which feared that local Muslim population might have pro-Turkish orientation and one day, in case of war, might be disloyal to the Imperial government. This is why after Ajara became part of the Russian Empire, the authorities attempted to populate the region with Christians from different parts of the Empire.

Interesting, the same feeling of mistrust and vision of local Muslim population as a threat to national security would be present in the thinking of the Soviet elite, which would later in 1943 lead to the deportation of thousands of Meskhetians (also known as Meskhetian Turks) to Central Asia. Even in the Post-Soviet times, there have been little efforts put on behalf of the Georgian government in order to repatriate Meskhetian Turks, part of whom considered themselves Georgians, who at one moment of history converted to Islam.

After discussing the development of Islam in Ajara region, it is necessary to extend the analysis of the history of Islam of Georgia by looking at another region – Meskheti (also known as Samtskhe-Javakheti).

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⁴⁶ Muhajiroba was a movement of a large portion of the native population of Ajara region to seek refuge in the Ottoman Empire. See Pelkmans, Mathijs. Defending the border: identity, religion, and modernity in the Republic of Georgia, 98-99

⁴⁷ Ethnically they were Georgians, Turks, Circassians, and Abkhaz. See Sanikidze, George, and Edward W. Walker. "Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia." 2004: 9
2.2 Islam in Meskheti region

There are both similarities and differences in the spread and development of Islam in Meskheti and in Ajara regions. But before dwelling on this, the definition of this group will be given.

Meskhetian Turks - also known as Meskhetians, Turkish Meskhetians, Ahiska Turks - are “a group of Turkish speaking people originally from Meskhetia […], a part of southern Georgia that borders Turkey”\textsuperscript{48}. Their name illustrates an uncertain identity that these people bear with them. Their ethnicity has been a contested and controversial issue for the last several decades.

When it comes to the ethnic origin of this group, there are three dominant views. Some historians argue that Meskhetian Turks are descendants of Mongol and Turkic invaders, who settled in Meskheti in the 13\textsuperscript{th} century\textsuperscript{49}. The proponents of this idea draw attention to the similarity of the Meskhetian Turks’ language to Turkish.

On the other hand, there is another view according to which Meskhetian Turks are ethnically Georgians who converted to Islam during the Ottoman rule. Finally, there is an in-between position which says that people who call themselves Meskhetian Turks are of mixed descent: some of them being Turks, and others - “Turkicized Georgians”\textsuperscript{50}.

This is the main difference between the Meskhetian Turks and Ajarans. Latter’s identity is not contested and they strongly associate themselves with Georgians.

It is necessary to extend this analysis further to identify the similarities between the two cases. Both in Ajara and in Meskheti, regional political elites were the first ones to adopt Islam. For example, in order to preserve the wealth and power, the feudal regional family Jaqeli converted to Islam in the mid of 16\textsuperscript{th} century and later other conversion followed. Similar to Ajara region, in Meskheti, the majority of the peasants were Christians at the beginning of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, while the nobility was predominantly Muslim\textsuperscript{51}. With this in mind, the situation with Georgian Muslims in Ajara and in

\textsuperscript{48} Aydıngün, Ayşegül, and Donald Adam Ranard. Meskhetian Turks: An introduction to their history, culture and resettlement experiences. Center for Applied Linguistics, Cultural Orientation Resource Center, 2006: 1
\textsuperscript{49} Tomlinson, K. Living Yesterday in Today and Tomorrow: Meskhetian Turks in Southern Russia. In Writing History, Constructing Religion, 2018: 87
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid, 87-88
\textsuperscript{51} Sanikidze, George, and Edward W. Walker. "Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia." 2004: 16
Meskheti will be analyzed and the changes that occurred in the 19th century, when these regions were subdued to the Russian imperial rule, will be examined.

2.3 Georgian Muslims and Georgian intelligentsia under the Russian Empire

“Nobody dreams about restoration of the old Georgia, which belongs to the past and cannot be returned. It is new Georgia that is the subject of our dreams and aspirations”.

Iakob Gogebashvili52.

In the late 18th century, Georgia was purged into crisis. Georgian political elite was seeking for the protection and future and for this turned towards its northern neighbour – the Russian Empire. For several decades Georgian kings were looking for military support, which, they believed, could safeguard southern borders. The promises of giving political independence, protection and military support to crumbling Georgian state, that were outlined in the Treaty of Giorgievsk (1783), were not fulfilled53.

In 1801 when Georgia was incorporated in Russian Empire, the ruling Bagratid dynasty was removed from the throne; the kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti was abolished and gradually Russian rule was established in the country. It is worth to look at the approach Russian Imperial authorities took towards the newly acquired territories: the pacification of the situation in the conquered territories could be brutal, but, interestingly, once control was established, local nobility was given an opportunity to join Russian ruling elite54. One could observe how similar the approach of the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire were when it came to mobilizing and integrating elites of the ethnic and/or religious minorities.

Because of its strong military power, the Russian Empire managed to “gather” the Georgian lands and establish a single political authority over them\textsuperscript{55}. It is in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century that Meskheti and Ajara were united with Georgia state, which was under the Russian Imperial rule. Along with expanding its influence and territory, the Russian Empire faced a problem of securing its southern border in the Caucasus. Thus several steps were made to ensure the durability of the frontier.

Russian Imperial authorities issued number of regulations in the 1870s which specified the rights and duties of the Islamic clergy in Georgia: religious education center was opened at the local level; along with that a special religious administration was created to oversee the Islamic establishment and the ban on studying theology in Muslim countries was imposed\textsuperscript{56}. By creating this religious administration, the state was aiming at obtaining loyalty of the religious leaders.

Russian imperial authorities through state-financed construction of mosques and religious schools tried to impede access of Ajaran students to Turkish higher education\textsuperscript{57}. At the same time, imperial elite allowed religious schools to grow in number and by the year of 1906 there were 119 mosques\textsuperscript{58}. Along with this, further steps were taken to create the high-ranking religious authority, which would be loyal to the Russian Empire. From the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century Muslim khojas (teachers) were appointed by state and received state salaries, ensuring that they keep allegiance to the Russian government\textsuperscript{59}.

Some of the abovementioned reforms were present in both Ajara and Meskheti regions, but overall when it comes to the development of Islam in Georgia in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, the literature predominantly discusses the Ajaran case. Up until now, there has been a distinct lack of in-depth studies concerning the history and identity of the community named as Meskhetian Turks. This does not allow the author to discuss profoundly the effects of Russian Imperial rule on Meskheti region.

\textsuperscript{56} Sanikidze, George, and Edward W. Walker. "Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia." 2004, 10
\textsuperscript{58} Sanikidze, George, and Edward W. Walker. "Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia." 2004, 19
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid, 10
Overall, before moving to the history of Islam in 20th century, it is necessary to mention that 19th century brought many changes to the Georgian society. It was the first time within centuries when Georgian state was unified under one political authority (not divided between Persian and Ottoman Empires) and the first time when Georgian intellectuals could think of the path of the country and its national identity. As Ronald Grigor Suny notes, “Under the impact of Russian rule Georgian intellectuals initiated their own search into country’s past, a search that immediately raised doubts about Georgia’s present and future”60. During three different time-periods (see Figure 5, p.27-28), Georgian intelligentsia was engaging in debate about country’s present problems and the ways to solve them. For some of them (pirveli dasi group), the solution was to cooperate with Russian Imperial authorities in order to achieve prosperity of the Georgian nation. Second group (meore dasi) saw Georgia’s development alongside Russia, but only in case if the reforms were conducted. They witnessed the failure of halfway liberal reforms of Russian Emperor Alexander II and considered that more significant steps should have been made for economic and social development of Georgia. The third group (mesame dasi) had more radical stance: the leaders of this group were influenced by Marxist ideas. As Russian Empire was on the brink of crisis, which resulted into February Revolution of 1917, approximately two decades before that Georgian Marxists decided to fight for independence of Georgia and saw European way of Social Democratic development as a solution.

Figure 3. Political groups in the late 19th-early 20th century

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Who were they?</th>
<th>Vision of Georgian future</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pirveli dasi</strong></td>
<td>“Fathers” consisting of aristocratic writers, who benefited from the Russian rule and were loyal to Russian Imperial authorities.</td>
<td>These two groups had similar social background, but different political views. It was led by ‘the father of modern nation’ Ilia Chavchavadze, who adhered to reformist conservative ideas but also</td>
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<tr>
<td>(‘First generation’)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Early 19th century</td>
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**Sons** or *tergdaleulni*[^61] Educated group of young intellectuals which was in rivalry with the first group (“Fathers”). Confronted the first group for little or no action taken for reviving Georgian society and culture.

**Meore dasi** (*‘Second generation’*)

Middle 19th century

They were first group of Georgian intellectuals to become involved in the urban and economic life of Georgia[^62]. They were more radical than *tergdaleulni*, from which they initially originated. Main leaders of this group – Niko Nikoladze and Giorgi Tsereteli – believed in reformist politics *within* Russian Empire.

**Mesame dasi** (*‘Third generation’*)

Late 19th- early 20th century

Georgian Marxists, strongly influenced by the ideas of Russian leftists. They were wary of early capitalist society then emerging in Georgia.

There were intense debates between these political groups regarding not only current problems and solutions to them, but also regarding what could unite Georgian nation. For instance, one of the prominent leaders of the 19th century national movement – Ilia Chavchavadze argued that Georgia needed ethnic cultural development. *Tergdaleulni*, with great influence of Chavchavadze’s ideas, were “successful in laying down intellectual foundations for the rise of Georgian nationalism and preparing ground for the spread of national sentiments among the wider public”[^63]. Up to this day people refer to Chavchavadze as ‘founding father’ of the modern Georgian nation and was canonized by the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) in 1987: with this the GOC capitalized on the popularity of his personality and used his triad ‘homeland, language and religion (Orthodox Christianity)’ as three elements which create Georgian nation.

In contrary, for Niko Nikoladze economic growth and trade should have been the priority as it would bring prosperity and unity to the country. Meanwhile, Noe Zhordania,

[^61]: *Tergdaleulni* can be translated from Georgian as “the ones who drank the water of the river Terek”. Terek river is separating Georgia from Russia and they would use this term to denote part of Georgian intelligentsia who received education in Russia.


part of mesame dasi took a middle stance in this debate, arguing that economic development was inseparable from cultural and social progress\textsuperscript{64}.

Bringing this debate back to the question of Georgian Muslims, it is important to note that in the new realm of being subordinates of Russian Imperial rule, political elites in Meskheti and even more so in Ajara region had to re-imagine their social and political role in the society. This process of ‘re-imagining’ coincided with the emergence of a pro-European and “liberal nationalist movement in Georgia led by the Christian aristocratic intelligentsia that had been educated in Russia”\textsuperscript{65}.

This intelligentsia considered itself being morally responsible for ‘educating’ Muslim Meskhetians and Ajarans. In regard to Meskhetians there were less of political engagement, as they did not have a common language as a mode for communication, whilst with Ajarans the situation was different. In referring to the past of Ajara region, the term Ottoman Georgia (osmaluri saqartvelo) would be used, which as Tamta Khalvashi argues showed that region was rendered within political and cultural space of Georgia\textsuperscript{66}.

2.4 1918-1921: Glimpse of Independence

Late 19\textsuperscript{th}-early 20\textsuperscript{th} century was a time of transition for both Georgian society and its elite. All of this was accompanied by the debates regarding the future of the country. During this transition time, Georgian society was experiencing significant social and economic changes. For example, industrialization of the country led to the creation and expansion of the working class in Georgia, which predominantly consisted of the peasants who were forced off their agriculture lands into working in factories and refineries in Tbilisi and Batumi. Furthermore, this was the time when the railroads were actively built in the country, thus transforming it by providing employment and


\textsuperscript{65} Khalvashi, Tamta. Peripheral Affects: Shame, Publics, And performance on the Margins of the Republic of Georgia. Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Copenhagen, Department of Anthropology, 2015: 52

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid, 52
transportation\textsuperscript{67}. This affected Georgian society irrespective of ethnic or religious backgrounds.

In the late 19\textsuperscript{th}-early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, Ajara region was undergoing some changes. In this regard, it is important to mention the personality of Memed Abashidze\textsuperscript{68}, who was from influential Muslim family and played a significant role in the process of integration of Ajara region to Georgia in late 19\textsuperscript{th}-early 20\textsuperscript{th} century. He was actively involved in the political debates of that time and was a strong advocate of cultural autonomy for Georgia, which, he believed, would also led to “the preservation of Ajara’s distinct Muslim heritage”\textsuperscript{69}. Memed Abashidze had a dream of Georgia, in which “the broken bridge between Muslim and Christian Georgia” could be restored\textsuperscript{70}.

Both political situation and the debates changed after the October Revolution of 1917. As Russia plunged into post-revolutionary turmoil, the region of South Caucasus united under Transcaucasian Federation, which included Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. In these political circumstances the Committee of Georgian Muslims was established, which aimed at underlining historic role of Muslims in Georgia and educating masses in order to evade possible turbulences. When Communists came to power, they signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in early 1918, which had as one of the conditions the secession of Ajara region to the Ottoman Empire. In opposition to the Committee of Georgian Muslims another organization was created – Sedai Millet, the main goal of which was to achieve Ajaran autonomy, but this time not within Georgia but within Ottoman Empire.

On May 26, 1918 Georgia gained independence and its new government, headed by Noe Zhordania, had to overcome political crisis in the country. The government looked at the ideas of Ajaran autonomy with skepticism. Similar resentment of Ajaran autonomy was present in the political elite of the early 1990s. There was the suspicion

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{memed} Memed Abashidze was the grandfather of Aslan Abashidze who was the leader of Ajaran Autonomous Republic from 1992 to 2004. See chapter 3.
\bibitem{tamta} Khalvashi, Tamta. \textit{Peripheral Affects: Shame, Publics, and Performance on the Margins of the Republic of Georgia}. Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Copenhagen, Department of Anthropology, 2015: 58
\bibitem{nargiz} Abashidze, Nargiz, and Teimuraz Komakhidze. \textit{Osmaluri Saqartvelo (Muslim Georgia)}. Batumi: Gamomcemloba Ajara, 2008: 27
\end{thebibliography}
that Muslim citizens living on borderlands might collaborate with Turkey thus challenging independence of newly created state\textsuperscript{71}.

New processes unfolded in 1919 when British troops replaced the Ottomans because of the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in WWI. The parliamentary elections were held and both Committee of Georgian Muslims and Sedai Millet – participated in them. Committee of Georgian Muslims won the majority and thus Memed Abashidze became the head of newly formed National Assembly.

Close proximity of Turkish border and presence of pro-Turkish sentiments amongst the part of Ajara’s population was later used to question belonging of the all Ajarans to Georgian nation. They were ‘shamed’ not only by ‘outsiders’ (other Georgians) but by its own political elite. After the victory in the elections, Memed Abashidze said: “The time has come to correct our old sins, to get rid of the shame, which misshaped us, to remove our thieves, troublemakers, stirrers and disgracers […]”\textsuperscript{72}. In 1920 Ajara became part of independent Georgia, but this experience did not last long as in 1921 the whole country was brought under the Soviet rule which posed new challenges to the whole Georgian society in general and Muslim Georgians in specific.

\textbf{2.5 Soviet Union and its policies}

In this last part of the historical overview, I would like to analyze the policies of the Soviet political elite in regard to Georgia and Georgian Muslims. The Soviet Union existed for seventy years and, notwithstanding the fact that it dismantled in 1991, its legacies live on and affect the post-Soviet countries political arena up to this day.

Paradoxically, after the fall of the Soviet Union, new Georgian state tried to return back to pre-Soviet identities, however, it “often ended in grounding and reinforcing Soviet constructions of identity, even though they were part of a process of overcoming and dismissing the Soviet past”\textsuperscript{73}. The contemporary processes in the Georgian society

\textsuperscript{71} Khalvashi, Tamta. \textit{Peripheral Affects: Shame, Publics, And Performance on the Margins of the Republic of Georgia}. Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Copenhagen, Department of Anthropology, 2015: 61

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid, 61

\textsuperscript{73} Pelkmans, Mathijs. \textit{Defending the border: identity, religion, and modernity in the Republic of Georgia}. Cornell University Press, 2006: 4-5
are influenced by the religious and ethnic polices of the Soviet times and by the political myths which outlived the USSR itself.

This is why it is important to look at the Soviet policies in regard to ethnicity and religions (specifically Islam). These ethnic and religious policies were not the same during the seven decades of the existence of this political entity and were evolving along with the political situation. The outline of landmark events and policies which changed lives of the people in the Soviet times and affect many aspects of the nowadays situation will be further presented.

2.5.1 The Soviet Union: Ethnic Policies

The analysis of ethnic and national policies of the Soviet Union is crucial because, as scholars Ronald Grigor Suny, Mathijs Pelkmans, Natalie Sabanadze, Rogers Brubaker note it is there that one could find the explanation of the rise of the ethnic nationalism in the Soviet republics in the 1980-s. The nationalism of 1990s, Brubaker explained in such a way: “Nationhood and nationalism flourish today because of the regime’s policies. […] Far from ruthlessly suppressing nationhood, the Soviet regime pervasively institutionalized it.”

The Soviet government was not trying to erase ethnic differences, but rather reinforced them. For example, in the Soviet Union, ethnic nationality was an “obligatory and mainly ascriptive legal category, a key element of an individual’s legal status”.

The information about ethnic nationality was put in the passports, birth certificates and was recorded in almost all bureaucratic and official transactions.

In spite of the fact, that prerevolutionary rhetoric of the Bolsheviks was about self-determination and internationalism, these ideas were not put in practice after they came to power. The new-Soviet state was based on ethnic political units and, as Ronald Suny notes, “rather than a melting pot, the Soviet Union became the incubator of new nations”.

Along with social and economic transformation, *korenizatsiia* (nativization)

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75 Ibid, 31
76 It was not possible to change one’s nationality and it was determined by the parental nationality.
policy was one of the main factors that bred nationalism. This policy of nativization or korenizatsii was put in practice in the late the 1920s and aimed at the consolidation of nationality by (1) supporting the native language78; (2) creating local political elite and national intelligentsia; (3) formally institutionalizing ethnicity. Later, because of Joseph Stalin’s distrust in this policy of nativization and his belief that it would strengthen national elites that would later oppose the Moscow, this policy was terminated in the 1930s.

Both korenizatsii and economic and social transformation of the Soviet society had a different effect on the different nationalities. Some of them “underwent internal consolidation and a growth of national consciousness, whereas others suffered more extremely from state-enforced Russification”79. Suny asserts, Georgia was closer to the first scenario than the second. For example, in the 1920s, as part of the korenizatsii policy ethnic Georgians were appointed to important governmental positions. Interestingly, Ajarans could not benefit from the policy of korenizatsii as they were perceived as ethnic Georgians80.

Overall, ethnicity was being strengthened through specific state policies, it was at the same time limited as the final goal was to assimilate all the cultures within the USSR and create one Soviet culture or in the words of Nikita Khruschev, “Soviet man and woman would replace national identities”81. However, this did not happen because the Soviet state adhered to the ethno-national policy, which designated national territories as “the homeland of and for a particular ethnonational group”82, thus nurturing and

78 For example, by 1927, the regional authorities proclaimed that in each of the Soviet republics more than 90% of school-age children from the titular nationality were receiving instruction in their own language. See Smith, Jeremy. “Nation-Building the Soviet Way.” Chapter. In Red Nations: The Nationalities Experience in and after the USSR, 92
bolstering the nationalism that yielded its results in the 1980s in all the republics of the USSR, including Georgia.

2.5.2 The Soviet Union: Religious Policies

After providing the analysis of the ethnic policies of the Soviet Union, it would be beneficial to look at the religious ones. After coming to power in October 1917, the Soviet government had an avowedly anti-religious stance, which led to pursuing rigid policies in order to force out the religion not only from public but also from private lives of the citizens. The formal religious institutions were attacked: in the case of Islam this meant the closing of mosques and madrassas, the eradication of Sharia courts by 1927, and the abolition of the waqf system by 1930. Furthermore, the transmission of religious knowledge and religious education were strongly limited and strict control on the printing and distribution of religious literature was imposed.

Initial massive destruction of mosques began in 1928 and lasted until the Second World War. During the war there were changes in the religious policies of the USSR and some of the mosques were reopened. However, in 1959 Khrushchev launched a second campaign against Islam during which many village mosques were closed.

This persecution of the Islam both in public and private spheres of the social life did not lead to the disappearance of the religion as such, but rather it transformed into what later social researchers called ‘underground Islam’ and ‘underground’ Islamic rituals. For example, during the Soviet period, Muslims in Georgia continued to perform number of religious rituals such as circumcision of the boys, wedding ceremonies and burials in the traditional Islamic way. In the interview, Tariel Nakaidze – the head of Georgian Muslims Union – noted that he grew up in the religious Muslim

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86 This ‘underground’ nature of religion was a common practice in the Soviet times. The same process could be seen in the case of Christianity. Sometimes christenings and coloring of the Easter eggs would take place at private homes.
family. Nakaidze recalls the ‘underground’ hidden Islamic practices that his family followed:\footnote{Interview with Tariel Nakaidze, p.69}

“My family was very religious, but my father would always tell me to say at school that I wasn’t Muslim and that I did not believe in God even though I did. This problem was further fueled by the fact that we were at the borderland; neighboring Turkey...Thus the control here was stricter. For example, every year boys had to be checked in order to see whether they were circumcised or not. Also, the Soviet government prohibited the killing of livestock during Muslim festivities. During Ramadan [...] my parents would put black cloth to the window so that no one from the outside sees the light, so that no one knows that my family wakes up at night to fast”.\footnote{Hoch, Tomáš, and Vincent Kopeček. "Transforming Identity of Ajarian Population." ALPPI Annual of Language Politics and Politics of Identity V, no. 5 (2011): 64}

In general, many changes occurred in Ajara and Meskheti regions of Georgia during the Soviet times. For instance, in Ajara out of 158 mosques only 2 were left by 1936, and, also, ban on wearing chadras was imposed\footnote{Blauvelt, Timothy K., and Giorgi Khatiashvili. "The Muslim Uprising in Ajara and the Stalinist Revolution in the Periphery." Nationalities Papers 44, no. 3 (2016): 359-60}. In 1929 there was a revolt in Ajara: Ajaran Muslims rebelled over the Soviet regime’s policies of closing madrasas and of forcing women to remove their veils (chadras)\footnote{“Text of Treaty of Kars.” Current History (New York) 17, no. 5 (1923): 769-770}. This revolt was suppressed by the Soviet troops. However, this incident and ‘underground’ Islamic practices show the important role that religion played in the daily lives of the Ajaran population.

When it comes to history of the Ajara region under the Soviet government, it is important to mention the Treaty of Kars, which was signed in October 1921 between the USSR and Turkey. In Article 6 of the Treaty, Turkey agreed to cede Batumi to Georgia only if “the population of the area is given administrative autonomy and that the right to develop its own culture, its own religion and its own agrarian regime is guaranteed”\footnote{“Text of Treaty of Kars.” Current History (New York) 17, no. 5 (1923): 769-770}. This was implemented and the Ajara region received the status of autonomous republic, thus becoming the only autonomous republic that was formed based on religious principle rather than ethnic. However, in the late 1920s, when the Soviet government started to enforce antireligious policies throughout the Soviet Union, the “use of religious
criteria to define Ajaran ASSR became unacceptable. The titular category “Ajaran,” which in everyday life meant “Muslim,” was abolished[^91].

It is also interesting to look at the ethnicity of the Ajarans or how the Soviet government perceived it. The only census in which Ajarans appeared as defined ethnic category (not Georgians but Ajarans) was conducted in 1926[^92]. But in the 1930s the category ‘Ajaran’ was removed from the official registration[^93].

Besides, because of the close proximity of the Turkish border, the strict border regime was imposed and some of the Ajarans who had relatives in Turkey, lost all contacts with them. During the 1920s - early 1930s the borders were kept open and this allowed local population to benefit economically from selling the goods on the different side of the border, but gradually the border regime became more and more rigid and by the 1937 it was impenetrable.

Moreover, in order to have full understanding of the Soviet policies in regard to Georgian Muslims it is necessary to look what was the fate of Meskheti region and of the Meskhetian Turks – community which was separated from the homeland and endured long deadly journey to Central Asia.

### 2.5.3 Deportation of the Meskhetians

Deportation of a large number of people and even of the whole communities was a common practice during the Stalin’s rule. From 1936 to 1952 eight ‘ethnic nations’ were deported *en masse* from their home republics or regions to Central Asia and Siberia.

During and in the aftermath of the Second World War, the leadership of the Communist party has decided to purge the Soviet border regions of ‘unreliable elements’. Even though these deportations are frequently associated with the Soviet Union, they were part of political reality of the Russian Empire too. Jeremy Smith presents historical example of 1864 deportations that occurred under the rule of the Tsar Alexander the Second. Alexander II’s government had deported to the Ottoman Empire large numbers.

of Circassians, Crimean Tatars, Cherkess, Chechens, Ossetians and Abkhaz people. Smith argues, that these measures intended to “clear space for Russian settlers who would provide a loyal population”\(^\text{94}\). The similar notion of loyalty and idea of ‘securing’ the borders was present in the thinking of the Soviet political elite.

In November 1944, approximately 120,000 NKVD agents were deployed in the southern regions of Georgia\(^\text{95}\). On November 15\(^\text{th}\), 200,000 of Meskhetian Turks were forced into cattle trains and were deported to Central Asia, mostly to Uzbekistan\(^\text{96}\). Interestingly, in the official ‘evacuation’ orders of the Soviet government Meskhetian Turks were identified as “Turks” even though the question of their identity and ethnicity is not so simple\(^\text{97}\). According to different accounts, approximately 20,000-30,000 of the Meskhetian Turks died on the way to Central Asia\(^\text{98}\). Those who survived two-months deadly journey, faced the lack of food, hygiene and proper living conditions on their arrival to Central Asia. In some cases, the local population treated newly arrived deportees with hostility\(^\text{99}\).

After the death of Stalin, the policies to the deportees started to change and in 1956 the decree was issued which allowed most of the deported people to repatriate and return to their homeland. However, this right was not granted to Meskhetian Turks until 1968. Even though legally situation has changed in the 1968, the repatriation process did not start and no practical arrangements were made. Even in the rare cases when families managed to return to Georgia, they were not allowed to settle down in Meskheti region itself.

Interestingly, when the whole community of the Meskhetian Turks was exiled to Central Asia, these reprisals did not take place (at least not to the same extent) in Ajara


\(^{99}\) Ibid.
region. Mathijs Pelkmans, while explaining how the historical events unfolded, gave the following reasons of this: on the one hand, he argues, the inhabitants of Ajara region were distrusted because of them living on the border with Turkey. On the other hand, sending into exile the whole group would give a negate impression to the Georgian community living across the border in Turkey\textsuperscript{100}.

After examining the Soviet policies in regard to Georgian Muslims – Ajarans and Meskhetian Turks, the outline of the processes and events that led to the rise of nationalism in Georgia will be presented.

2.5.4 The 1970s –1980s: the Rise of Nationalism in the Soviet Georgia

The last two decades of existence of the USSR were marked with the rise of nationalist sentiments all over the Soviet Union. Georgia was not an exception: the country experienced the rise of both ethnic and religious nationalism. These nationalistic sentiments became important factors in shaping politics of the Soviet Georgia in the late 1970s and outlived the Soviet Union and still determine political narrative in the contemporary Georgia.

Ronald Grigor Suny wrote that three types of nationalism emerged in the Soviet Georgia in the 1970s. They were\textsuperscript{101}:

1. ‘Official nationalism’, within the Communist party and Georgian state bureaucracy;

2. Dissident nationalism, expressed by human rights activists such as Zviad Gamsakhurdia\textsuperscript{102}, who would later become president of newly independent Georgian state.

3. Counter-nationalism of the smaller nationalities within Georgia, which aimed to protest against “systematic discrimination by the ethnic majority”.

Indeed, by the mid-1970s, the nationalities issue instead of disappearing and creating ‘Soviet man and woman’, became a permanent fact of the Soviet politics\textsuperscript{103}.

\textsuperscript{100} Pelkmans, Mathijs. Defending the border: identity, religion, and modernity in the Republic of Georgia. Cornell University Press, 2006


\textsuperscript{102} Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a former human rights activist and an active member of the Georgian Helsinki group, was the leader of the Georgian national liberation movement. In 1991, after the fall of the USSR, he became the first president of independent Georgia.
In case of Georgia, these nationalist sentiments went hand in hand with the Orthodox Christian faith, which was mobilized by Georgian nationalists in their struggle for independence. In particular, one of the examples of this nationalism is the slogan was published in the popular journal “Literaturuli Sakartvelo” (Literary Georgia) in the fall of 1988, which proclaimed – ‘Georgia for the Georgians’. The main reasoning behind this was that Georgia should be free of un-Georgian elements\(^{105}\). It was more than Georgian for Georgians: the new ideology considered only Christian Georgians to be true citizens, thus Georgia was to be a state only for the Orthodox Georgians.

There was a significant rise of the presence of the Orthodox religion in the public sphere, which participated in the pro-independence protests of 1980s and displayed Christian symbolic (see Figure 4).

This open expression of the religious sentiments was possible because of the lessening of the restrictions of the Soviet state concerning religion. There was an increase of display of religiosity not only among Orthodox Christians, but also among Georgian Muslims. This attempt to bring ‘underground’ Islam ‘up-the-ground’ was met with strong anti-Islamic attitude, which could no longer be backed by the atheist Soviet ideology, but was seen as part of the nationalist sentiments. In Mathijs Pelkmans words, “the ‘reappearance’ of Islam in Ajara was seen as an attack on the Georgian nation and as a denial of Ajara’s position within


Surprisingly, the harshest reactions were not from the rest of Georgia, but from Ajara region and Ajarans themselves. For instance, renowned Ajaran writer and a public figure Pridon Khalvashi published a novel “Can A Muslim be Georgian?” in which he concludes that Islam is incompatible with the national identity.

After the collapse of the USSR, new Georgian state took Orthodox Christianity as the source of the national identity. This process started during the Soviet period continued throughout the 1990s (see Chapter Three: Post-Soviet reality: Islam and Nationalism in Georgia) and has its legacies in the contemporary political reality of Georgia.

Overall, throughout the Soviet era, the history and identity of Ajara region was actively re-created and closely connected to Georgian one. The Soviet government was trying to distance the region from its recent Ottoman past. Ajarans were not considered by the Soviet government as ethnically different from Georgians, in spite of the fact that Ajara had the status of the autonomous republic. This was also shown by the fact that the category “Ajaran” disappeared from Soviet statistics and documentation after the year of 1926. The residents of Ajara were not favored and promoted in the Communist Party, unlike residents of other Soviet autonomous regions.

Besides, it can be said that the state policies of the Soviet Union, drove religions, including Islam, ‘underground’ and forced them to hide under the surface of social structures. When by the late 1980s the republics of the Soviet Union were disillusioned with the Soviet state, new ideology came on the political arena of the USSR. This disillusionment in the communist ideology and the nurturing of the nationalist sentiments within the Soviet state, brought nationalism to the political scene of the Post-Soviet region.

Nationalism became linked with the religious identity and it is through religion that national myths were reinforced. As Alexander Agadjanan noted, during this time “the grand narratives of perennial religious identity have been included in official political discourses, heavily promoted by engaged local academia and have become

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mainstream in popular culture”\textsuperscript{108}. The changes occurred not only in the political but also in the religious landscape of Georgia. This will be further discussed in the chapter three.

\textsuperscript{108} Agadjanian, Alexander, Ansgar Jödicke, and Evert van der Zweerde, eds. \textit{Religion, nation and democracy in the South Caucasus}. Routledge, 2014: 27
3. Post-Soviet reality: Islam and Nationalism in Georgia

This chapter first and foremost will analyze the processes and landmark events that took place in Georgia after the fall of the Soviet Union: the analysis of the political situation of the 1990s and of the reforms that occurred after the Rose Revolution of 2003 is presented. Further, the third chapter will look at the collective narratives that are present in the community of Georgian Muslims (see 3.2.1 ‘Superficial Islam’ in Ajara and the narrative of ‘fake conversions’ and 3.2.2 Georgian Muslims as Tatars) Thus, the views of Georgian public in regard to Islam and Muslim Georgians are examined and presented.

3.1 The historical processes in Georgia after the fall of the Soviet Union

The Post-Soviet era was the time of transformation both in Georgia and in Ajara region. Within the last two-three decades, Ajara has experienced socio-economic and religious changes. But before exploring these changes and challenges, it is important to look at the period of the 1990s which was marked by the rise of Orthodox Christian nationalism. The main questions tackled in this chapter are: what was the role of nationalism in the Post-Soviet transformation of Georgia? And what effect did it have on the Georgian Muslim community? Was the transformation that country went through after the Rose Revolution fundamental or it was the attempt to ‘reshape’ practices of the past?

3.1.1 The 1990s: the thorny path of independence

First free parliamentary elections in Georgia took place in the autumn of 1990. Party of Zviad Gamsakhurdia – “Round Table – Free Georgia” - won a landslide victory in the parliamentary elections by gaining 54% of the popular vote (its main opponent was
the Communist Party of Georgia which secured 29.6% of the votes). However, the party was not welcomed in Ajara, because of its nationalistic stance. In Ajara region, “Round Table – Free Georgia” Party won only 24% of the votes, while Communist Party gained 56% of the popular support, which was the result of Zviad Gamsakhurdia’s public statements about plans to abolish the autonomous status of Ajara. The population considered this to be a threat to their religious identity.

Besides, in 1989 the anti-Soviet demonstration, organized by the national liberation movement, was held in Batumi. During this demonstration, thousands of Ajarans gathered to greet Gamsakhurdia. Zviad Gamsakhurdia said words that resonate up to this day and were brought up during the interview by Tariel Nakaidze. Gamsakurdia said: “Dear Ajarans, you are also Georgians!” According to Tamta Khalvashi, instead of including Ajarans in the state building process, by using this adverb – ‘also’ - Gamsakurdia excluded them.

The election slogan “Georgia to Georgians” not only debarred ethnic minorities from the process of the nation-building, but also alienated Georgian Muslims who considered themselves to be of the same ethnic group as Georgians. The reason for this alienation of Georgian Muslims laid in the fact that between the lines of the above-mentioned slogan, people read “Georgia to Christian Georgians” as this is how the nationalist elite of the late 1980s-1990s defined Georgian nationhood in Christian Orthodox terms.

On April 9th, 1991 Georgia proclaimed its independence from the Soviet Union under the leadership of Zviad Gamsakhurdia. His presidency lasted till January 1992 and led to his eventual downfall. From 1992 till 2003 Eduard Shevardnadze was the president.

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110 Ibid

111 Khalvashi, Tamta. *Peripheral Affects: Shame, Publics, And Performance on the Margins of the Republic of Georgia*. Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Copenhagen, Department of Anthropology, 2015: 66

of Georgia. His rule was marked with the economic recession, political crisis, corruption and constant shortage of electricity, medicines and consumer goods.\footnote{Being born in 1994, I vaguely remember Shevardnadze’s era in Georgia. One of the distinct memories I have is the electricity shortage in my hometown and how the whole building would start applauding when the electricity would finally come. Even today people frequently refer to the 1990s as “bneli 90s” (bneli means dark in Georgian and refers to both political abyss in which country was plunged and electricity shortage).}

Because of the nationalistic policies of the new Georgian political elite, and partially because of Gamsakhurdia’s intransigent position towards ethnic minorities, the civil war broke out in the autonomous region of South Ossetia and in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia. Ajara, which also had the status of Autonomous Republic, did not share this tragic fate. Main reason for this was the fact that, unlike Abkhaz people, Ajarans did not view themselves as ethnically different from Georgians.\footnote{During the Soviet era, Abkhaz leaders petitioned Moscow three times (in 1956, 1967, 1978) with the request, which was turned down on every occasion, of Abkhaz Autonomous Republic to be incorporated into the Russian Federation. Nothing similar took place in Ajara region. See Wheatley, Jonathan. \textit{Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution : Delayed Transition in the Former Soviet Union}. Post-Soviet Politics 290704146. Aldershot [etc.]: Ashgate, 2005: 57.}

In March 1991, with the support of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Aslan Abashidze\footnote{Aslan Abashidze was the grandson of Memed Abashidze – the political leader of Ajara in the late 19th-early 20th century - mentioned in the second chapter of the thesis.} was elected as the chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Autonomous republic of Ajara. Along with being from a noble Muslim Ajaran family, Aslan Abashidze also was a member of the Soviet \textit{nomenklatura}. The political background determined his affiliations with Russia and his repressive policies.

Abashidze consolidated power and became autocratic leader of the region. After Gamsakhurdia was overthrown in January 1992, Aslan Abashidze declared state of emergency and closed the borders of the Ajara region. The checkpoints were put at the borders of Ajara with other regions of Georgia. This move protected Ajara region from the paramilitary group “Mkhedrioni” (“Knights Horsemen”) which was rampaging in the other parts of Georgia. “Mkhedrioni” militias had nationalist orientation and the members of this group wore a bronze medallion depicting St. George slaying the dragon – symbol of Georgian nationhood and Orthodoxy.\footnote{Wheatley, Jonathan. \textit{Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution : Delayed Transition in the Former Soviet Union}. Post-Soviet Politics 290704146. Aldershot [etc.]: Ashgate, 2005: 46.}
Aslan Abashidze’s rule in the Ajara region lasted from 1991 to 2004 and was marked with autocratic leadership, high levels of corruption, political repressions and general sense of fear. Abashidze almost turned Ajara in his private fiefdom: he headed security forces, police departments, customs and tax agencies thus de facto being independent from the national center. Abashidze was able to control all the trade that crossed the province to and from Turkey and other points on the Black Sea.

Even though Aslan Abashidze opened new mosques, tried to link himself with Islamic religious leaders and tried to gain their support, “there is no evidence of any Islamist resurgence or religious proselytizing under Abashidze’s rule”, unlike what Beglar Kamashidze, who currently holds the position of mufti of all Georgian Muslims, claimed during the interview. Beglar said, that after “1992 they started to actively reopen mosques in the Upper Ajara”, thus concluding that this was the sign of religious revival of Islam in Ajara.

Tariel Nakaidze, the head of Georgian Muslims Union, who is in the opposition to Samufo (headed by Kamashidze) because of its ties with the government, unknowingly agreed with him on this point. During his interview, Nakaidze also looked at the history of Islam in Ajara in the post-Soviet era in the bright way: “Now, after 1990s, we have a Golden Age of Islam in Georgia…That’s how I call it...And history will say about this one day...” More than hopes, the 1990s brought challenges to Islam in Ajara.

Thomas Liles points out that by the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, predominant part of Ajara’s population was Muslim. However, this confessional makeup changed during the Post-Soviet period and now 65% of Ajarans are Christians and 30% are Muslim. Scholars like Tamta Khalvashi, Mathijs Pelkmans and Kimberley Marten

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117 It is thought that Georgian state budget lost approximately $35 million per year, because of the revenue from the taxes going to Aslan Abashidze and his clan. See Marten, Kimberly Zisk. 2012. Warlords: Strong-arm Brokers in Weak States. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost (accessed June 21, 2018): 75


120 Interview with Beglar Kamashidze, 90

121 Interview with Tariel Nakaidze, 72

write about the process of marginalization of Islam in the post-Soviet period. In the late 1980s, Georgian nationality became strongly linked to Christianity and in this nationalist discourse, being Georgian and Muslim became incompatible thing. When it comes to reopening of the old mosques or construction of the new ones, Pelkmans claims, that it did not always mean, “that people were planning to attend prayers, and a number of these mosques subsequently remained empty. Religion had suddenly returned to social life in Ajaria, but its contents were not as yet defined”\textsuperscript{123}. The years after the fall of the Soviet Union and before the Rose Revolution could be regarded as the time of search, search for identity, search for the way of expressing religious feelings in the new state, which refused atheist policies of the USSR and found itself trapped in the new reality.

3.1.2 The Rose Revolution: ‘new’ old symbols and meanings

Distrust and dissatisfaction with Eduard Shevarnadze’s government grew in Georgia and reached a pick after parliamentary elections of November 2003 in which charges of widespread irregularities and fraud were raised. This anti-government movement was a response to economic and political failure. Faced with numerous protests, Shevardnadze resigned on November 23, 2003 and thus the change of political power ended without bloodshed.

In the January 4\textsuperscript{th}, 2004 presidential election Mikheil Saakashvili won 96.2% of the popular vote\textsuperscript{124}. Saakashvili and his party – the United National Movement (UNM) - presented themselves as a group of young politicians with Western-oriented political values. Most of the new ministers were young postgraduates who received their education in the USA or Europe\textsuperscript{125}. They tried to implement a number of reforms in order to modernize Georgian state and its crumbling economy\textsuperscript{126}.

Even though after the Rose Revolution of 2003, the strong emphasis was made on the Western democratic ideas and the ideas of the separation of the church and state, the reality was much more complex. For instance, some Christian symbols became part of

\textsuperscript{123} Pelkmans, Mathijs. \textit{Defending the border: identity, religion, and modernity in the Republic of Georgia}. Cornell University Press, 2006:166
\textsuperscript{125} Rayfield, Donald. \textit{Edge of empires: A history of Georgia}. Reaktion books, 2013: 392
\textsuperscript{126} For example, tariff barriers were demolished, taxes minimized, government regulations abolished.
the public life. One of the most striking examples of this transformation is new Georgian flag (see Figure 5).

![Figure 5. Flags of Independent Georgia](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flag of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918–1921)</th>
<th>Flag of Georgia from 1990 to 2004</th>
<th>Flag of Georgia (2004 to present)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The evolution of the national flag provides with interesting perspective on the role of history and historical symbols in the political system of Georgia. The flag that Georgia was using from 1990 to 2004 was almost the same as the one that was used during the country’s independence from 1918 to 1921. The only difference the latter one had slightly different proportion (3:4) than the former (1918-1921 flag’s ratio was 1:2)\(^\text{127}\).

In the flag that was used by the First Republic (from 1918 to 1921 and later from 1990 to 2004), the cherry red color was to illustrate “the national color, the black stood for the tragedies of the past, white for hopes for the future”\(^\text{128}\). It is believed, that the new white flag with five red crosses was used for the first time in the 1320s\(^\text{129}\). By adopting this new flag as a state symbol, new government emphasized “country’s Christian roots, however, it diminished the role of the Georgia’s Muslim population in the new state\(^\text{130}\).

### 3.1.3 Religion and education

While speaking about the presence of Christian religion in the public sphere of Georgia, the respondents did not mention this change in the interviews. However, four out five respondents (with an exception of Mathijs Pelkmans\(^\text{131}\)) emphasized the effects of educational reform of the new government. The evaluation that Tariel Nakaidze,

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\(^{131}\) Mathijs Pelkmans conducted his fieldwork in 2001 and since then he did not have an opportunity to visit Georgia and observe closely the changes that occured in the country after the Rose Revolution.
Father Maxime, Hurie Abashidze and Beglar Kamashidze gave to the reform was sometimes different, but they shared this belief that it had a significant effect on Georgian society.

My respondents mentioned several crucial changes that took place in the educational sphere: 1) the restriction of teaching religion in schools, 2) introduction of a single entrance examination and 3) the role of getting religious education abroad. In 2005, the parliament of Georgia passed a law, which restricted the teaching of religion and the use of the religious symbols in the schools. Ketevan Gurchiani, who conducted fieldwork study dedicated to this topic, argues that this change was brought by the new government in order to ensure “the institutional independence of public schools from the growing influence of the Georgian Orthodox Church”\textsuperscript{132}.

As discussed before, starting from the 1980s there was the rise of Orthodox religion and of the Church as religious institution too. In the law of 1997, regarding general education, GOC was given the right to be actively involved in education. This is when Father Maxime worked as a teacher in schools, teaching the foundations of Christian religion. This tie between the state and the church was reinforced even more with the constitutional agreement of 2002, which declared “complete freedom of belief and religion” and at the same time recognized “the special role of the Apostle Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia in the history of Georgia and its independence from the state”\textsuperscript{133}. When the new government came to power in 2003, they had to operate within this framework along with thinking of creating new Westernized state. The law of 2005 restricted the presence of religious symbols and teaching at schools, thus trying to portray Georgia as multiethnic country, which has more inclusive notion of citizenship\textsuperscript{134}.

Even though initially this law was put in practice and religion was removed from the classroom, later it found a loophole in the political system: the most respected Georgian kings and writers (such as Ilia Chavchavadze) were proclaimed as saints by the

Georgian Orthodox Church in the late 1980s-1990s, thus allowing history classes to become the place of display of the religious symbols (See Figure 6).

Nowadays, along with displaying Christian religious symbols, schools usually organize school trips to the old churches. Gurchiani argues that linking ethnic identity to religious one led to such a process that every attempt of the government to remove religion from the classroom was and is “perceived as an attack on identity as well”\textsuperscript{136}. This is also illustrated by the words of Father Maxime\textsuperscript{137}:

"90% of our population are Orthodox Christians; are baptized and married in the churches; that is why it is necessary for the children to know more about the Christian religion. [...] Just because there are, let’s say, two Chechens in the classroom...two Muslims...because of this not to teach Christian religion...I don’t think this is right. No one asks them to baptize, or to wear the cross, but why not to know about Christianity?"

Along with this increased presence of the Orthodox Christian religion after the fall of the Soviet Union, there were other changes which affected Georgian Muslim community: the introduction of universal national examination system and an opportunity to receive education abroad.

Tariel Nakaidze and Hurie Abashidze said that the new national university entrance exam allowed many students from Ajara to get education in Tbilisi and feel that the competition that they were facing was fair. In the interview, Tariel noted that after

\textsuperscript{135} The pictures were taken from the article of Ketevan Gurchiani (2017) Georgia in-between: religion in public schools, Nationalities Papers, 45:6, p. 1106, DOI: 10.1080/00905992.2017.1305346

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid: 1100

\textsuperscript{137} Interview with Father Maxime, p. 76
these state exams were introduced, the situation significantly changed as it gave bigger opportunities to Ajaran youth. In Tariel’s words\textsuperscript{138}:

\begin{quote}
State exams gave Muslim children an opportunity to get education here in Georgia. Gifted and talented people were selected: those who were smart enough and were above the average could go to the university”.
\end{quote}

Besides, Tariel argued that new education system gave a chance to female Muslim students to get higher education. From Khulo municipality alone there were 30 female students studying in the different universities of the country in 2010. Many of them were accepted to prestigious Tbilisi State University – “in the past an unprecedented thing for the girl from Khulo”. Along with this there was and still is this phenomenon that it is easier for Ajarans to get education in Turkey than in Georgia. When I asked Hurie why it is so, and whether it was because of financial reasons she said\textsuperscript{139}:

\begin{quote}
If you need to go from Ajara to Tbilisi, you are not financially independent. Because you have to find a job in order to finance your own education or you are dependent on your parents who give the last piece of bread to help you”.
\end{quote}

On the other hand, Turkish government has developed a scholarship program, which allows talented students from different parts of Georgia to go and study in Turkey with tuition fee and living expenses being covered by the state of Turkey. Hurie Abashidze participated in the program and studied Psychology in Hacettepe University. She said, annually, around 30 students go to Turkey with this program’s funding. However, as it was understood from the interview, her decision to study in Turkey was determined by the necessity rather then desire. Hurie recalled\textsuperscript{140}:

\begin{quote}
The reason I went abroad was because I did not want to depend on my family and to be a financial burden. I passed state exams in Georgia, but unfortunately I have decided to go to Turkey because of the financial reason. [...] Turkey can be an option but it is not the only option that Ajarans have. Many European universities have good scholarship programs. If I had known back then about
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{138} Interview with Tariel Nakaidze, p.76
\textsuperscript{139} Interview with Hurie Abashidze, p.80
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid
Tariel Nakaidze, who is older than Hurie Abashidze, gives similar account of why he went to study in Turkey in the 1990s. In the interview, he emphasized that the chances for him to get education in one of the universities in Tbilisi were limited: “I tried enrolling to Tbilisi State University but I could not get in because of the simple reason - we did not have money and could not pay the fees necessary for the admission to the university”\textsuperscript{141}. Thus, financial support and university stipends became an important factors for students in their decision to study abroad, especially in Turkey, who cannot afford to pay tuition and accommodation fees in Georgia.

Initially, I thought that this opportunity to study abroad became available to Georgian students after the Rose Revolution. But Mathijs Pelkmans accounts say that it was present in the early 1990s too. In the interview Pelkmans said that what he saw while doing fieldwork in Ajara was that:

\begin{quote}
"Relatively affluent people from Turkey or from elsewhere who were devout Muslims; who would work for Muslim charities, they would come to Ajara, they would visit religious leaders there and they would say that they have possibility of sending some people to university in Cairo, in Turkey or elsewhere".
\end{quote}

Receiving religious education abroad would later lead to significant changes in the religious practices of Georgian Muslims. George Sanikidze asserts, the generational conflict emerged in Ajara, because “older generation favoring traditional Islam” and Ajaran youth favoring ‘new’ Islam, which he argues is close to Salafism\textsuperscript{142}.

When asked Tariel Nakaidze denied existence of this problem. However, later, he said that when disagreements arise, they are mostly because of the difference of the religious education\textsuperscript{143}:

\begin{quote}
"The older generation knows Islam by word of mouth. The younger one has received a religious education. This is what causes misunderstanding".
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{141} Interview with Tariel Nakaidze, p. 70
\textsuperscript{142} Sanikidze, George, and Edward W. Walker. "Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia." 2004
\textsuperscript{143} Interview with Mathijs Pelkmans, p. 86
Besides, Hurie Abashidze also underlined this transformation, which took place in the Post-Soviet Ajara. Because of the fact that religion, be it Christianity or Islam, had to go ‘underground’ during the Soviet times, the religious education was non-existent and people fasted and prayed the way their forefathers used to. However, Hurie noted that one could see clashes and arguments between the people who adhered to ‘old’ beliefs and the ones who started following ‘new’ Islamic practices:

“My generation and those who are a bit older or younger, they are now fully aware of what they are doing. Some people like it and say, “what we were doing wrong, you are doing it right now”. But sometimes it also causes some arguments”

Another important problem is the difference in the religions of the parents and children. After the fall of the Soviet Union, some people in Ajara region started to covert to Christianity as it was seen the ‘true’ religion, the religion on the past. This issue is discussed in the 3.2.1 ‘Superficial Islam’ in Ajara and the narrative of ‘fake conversions’.

3.2 Existing narratives

In this part of the thesis, the analysis of the narratives, which exist about and within Georgian Muslims, will be presented. There are several important trends: (1) Georgian public and academia sometimes looks at the nature of Islam in Ajara region as something that is of ‘superficial’, not deeply religious, nature. Interestingly, this is the narrative that religious Muslims apply to the part of the population, which converted to Christianity after the fall of the Soviet Union, thus questioning their sincerity of their feelings. (2) Further, the widespread belief and practice of calling Georgian Muslims will be studied and roots of this thinking will be traced.

3.2.1 ‘Superficial Islam’ in Ajara and the narrative of ‘fake conversions’

When it comes to looking at Islamization of Ajara region in the past, there are two narratives that are present in the Georgian society and scholarship. In the 2.1 Islam in Ajara region the narrative of forced conversion to Islam was closely analyzed. In this part of the thesis, the second predominant narrative will be looked at. It is thought that even

144 Interview with Hurie Abashidze, p.83
when Islamization occurred, it was superficial and did not have a significant effect on people’s lives. George Sanikidze and Tomas Hoch argue that the fact that Islamization of the region occurred only in the late 19th century, it “failed to instill in the Ajarians a lasting political and cultural identity”\textsuperscript{145}. Furthermore, Sanikidze contends that Islamization of Ajara region was “rather superficial, as Islamic practices in the region intermingled with non-Islamic traditions often linked to Georgian Christianity”\textsuperscript{146}.

However, this position does not explain the phenomenon of muhajiroba and emigration of Georgian Muslims to the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th century. Muhajiroba shows the important role that religion played in the identification of the Muslim Georgians in Ajara. Besides, as the respondent Hurie Abashidze said, if Islam was imposed from the above and was alien to people, they would have abandoned it after Ajara region was reintegrated with Georgia in 1877-1878\textsuperscript{147}:

“\textit{If the religion was just formality, then it would not be present up to this day. People would have destroyed the mosques after becoming part of Georgia (in the late 19th century – AC)}”.

Mathijs Pelkmans shared this view and argued that the fact that Ajarans are Muslims for shorter period of time then they were Christians does not say anything about their religiosity. Pelkmans viewpoint challenges Sanikidze’s argument that non-Islamic traditions were closely tied to Georgian Christianity. Mathijs Pelkmans argued that the majority of the population converted to Islam in the mid or even late 19th century and this is the time when it became heavily politicized, good example of which is muhajiroba\textsuperscript{148}:

“\textit{It (muhajiroba – AC) shows that the religion played very important role, which doesn’t mean that there were no Christian traces, traditions and rituals. But people no longer thought of these rituals and traditions as Christian or they not necessarily thought of this as Georgian either. They most probably saw this as their local way of doing things}”.

\textsuperscript{146} Sanikidze, George, and Edward W. Walker. "Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia." 2004: 7
\textsuperscript{147} Interview with Hurie Abashidze, p.70
\textsuperscript{148} Interview with Mathijs Pelkmans, p.85
It would be wrong to look at the religious conversion as a moment of absolute breach with the past religious tradition. The Christian practices that Ajarans retained after accepting Islam were meaningful for them as thus they way were doing things the way there ancestors did. This is the process that can also be in the case of Georgian community living in Fereydan region of Iran. Fereydani Georgians, as they are frequently referred to, have the practice of putting cross on the bread and in their embroidery while at the same time they are known for being devote Shia Muslims. This ‘inconsistency’ can be explained by looking at the dialogue that occurred between one Georgian journalist and Fereydani Georgian woman. When asked, why did she put the cross on the bread, she answered: “Our ancestors were baking the bread this way… The cross means Georgia”\textsuperscript{149}.

This argument is also supported by the fieldwork, which Tamta Khalvashi conducted in the province of Artvin - northeastern part of Turkey - in the early 2000s. Artvin province is the place where descendants of Georgian Muslims\textsuperscript{150}. Khalvashi’s main goal was to examine the role of collective remembering and of certain traditions and practices of Muslim Georgian community in the northeast Turkey. According to Khalvashi, traditions and practices which Georgian highlanders often associate with Christianity and folk belief, Muslim Georgians in Turkey “consider them to be only folk religious practices” excluding the factor of Christianity\textsuperscript{151}.

Thus, the belief that the forcibly converted to Islam Georgian Muslims did not fully accept Islam is proved to be incorrect. Further, it is worth to look at the narrative of ‘fake conversions to Christianity’, which became a popular explanation amongst Georgian Muslim community in order to explain why part of them became Christians in the Post-Soviet Ajara. Georgian society doubts and questions Islamic religiosity of Georgian Muslims, but Muslims on their part also consider conversions to Christianity to be done for ‘career purposes’ rather than because of the ‘real’ religious convictions.

\textsuperscript{149} TV-programme. Fereydan. 2016, URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nc0_hrNa-II&t=1208s
\textsuperscript{150} They are descendants of Georgians who emigrated to the Ottoman Empire during muhajiroba or lived there even prior to it.
After the fall of the Soviet Union, Georgian society underwent both re-Christianization and re-Islamization. A large fraction of the urban population of the Ajara region converted to Orthodox Christianity, while at the same time Islam dominated in the Upper Ajara - rural mountainous part of the region.

In the interview with Tariel Nakaidze, while referring to the process of Christianization amongst the population of the Ajara region after the fall of the Soviet Union, he named it as ‘fake conversion’ or conversion for the ‘career purposes’. Even though, this generalization might not be true for the majority of the cases. It can be relevant for some of them.

There are several scholarly explanations of why the Christianization process occurred in the Post-Soviet Ajara. Mathijs Pelkmans both in his book and in the interview noted that the conversion to Orthodox Christianity “went hand in hand with increased identification with the Georgian nation”152. Even though sometimes this conversion led to baptism and actual involvement in ‘Orthodox life, still more often it was more of “a verbal and symbolic affiliation that did not have great implications for the everyday lives of those involved”153. In particular, this symbolic meaning of conversion was caused by the predominant idea that Christianity was the ‘true religion’ of the ancestors. Interestingly, Kimberly Marten wrote, that Ajaran elite, whilst speaking about conversion to Christianity, was talking of it as of “returning to their families’ Christian roots, after their ancestors were forcibly converted by Turkish occupiers”154. Here one could observe the idea of forced conversion to Islam, which was analyzed in the thesis.

Further, nationalists of the 1980s-1990s while defining who counted as ‘true Georgian’ evoked the pre-Soviet identity, which linked Orthodox Christianity to ‘Georgianness’. Tamta Khalvashi argues, “It was against this background that many secular or non-secular Muslim Ajarans started to adopt Christianity as a source of new identity”155. This was the political environment in which Ajaran population found itself.

153 Ibid
155 Khalvashi, Tamta. Peripheral Affects: Shame, Publics, And Performance on the Margins of the Republic of Georgia. Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Copenhagen, Department of Anthropology (2015): 4
This image was supported and promoted by Georgian Orthodox Church, which positioned itself as “the best protector of Georgia’s authentic national identity. It promoted the view that one could not be truly Georgian without being Orthodox”. Orthodox Christianity was portrayed as the fundamental pillar of the Georgian identity.

Interestingly, in the past this idea that Georgian Muslims cannot be Georgians existed both in the thinking of Georgian public as well as in the Georgian Muslims views. Beglar Kamashidze attributed this to the policies of the Ottoman Empire rather than saying that it was inherently Georgian way of thinking and regarding Muslim population:

“The elderly generation of Georgian Muslims could not say that they were Georgians. This was the fault of the Ottoman Empire...They put this idea in them (in Georgian Muslims – AC) that being Georgian meant that one was also Christian. So if someone would say that he/she was Georgian it would mean that the person is not Muslim. [...]They (the Ottomans – AC) influenced people in such a way, that you could not tell the grandfathers that they were Georgians because being Georgian meant being non-Muslim”.

Natalie Sabanadze gives the same account in her study of Georgian nationalism. Sabanadze wrote, in the self-identification of Georgians of 19th century religion is more important in defining self then ethnicity: “The common question in a medieval and 19th century Georgia was to ask what your sjuli158 (ra sjulisa khar?) is. If the answer was Georgian, it meant Orthodox by definition. Catholic Georgians were curiously called French, while Muslim Georgians were called Tatars”159. This discourse of Georgian Muslims being considered Tatars is examined below.

3.2.2 Georgian Muslims as Tatars

Georgia historically had a high geopolitical importance for the Muslim Empires: Persian and Ottoman. The influence of the Ottoman Empire and of the shared history is
shown in the **2. Historical overview**. This part of the research focuses on the widespread perception among Georgian population, which refers to Georgian Muslims as ‘Tatars’\(^\text{160}\).

‘Tatar’ turned out to be an all-encompassing term for all the Muslims living in the country. This association of Muslim religion with non-Georgian ethnicity is the major cause of the discontent of Georgian Muslims, which contributes to their sense of being excluded from the Georgian society. When I asked Hurie Abashidze, what are the problems that Georgian Muslim community is facing she named this as “the most important problem”. Hurie noted\(^\text{161}\):

> "We are not seen as Georgians. This idea that person of different faith can also be Georgian is unacceptable for them (Georgian public –AC). We steal their ‘Georianness’.”

This ‘Non-Georgianess’ of Georgian Muslims is something which is frequently emphasized. My grandfather insisted on attending the interview with Tariel Nakaidze (for more information see 4.1 Limitations of the research). After the interview with Tariel, the grandfather said that, in his opinion, Tariel does not have ‘Georgian’ appearance.

This idea of Muslim people being not Georgians appeared in the late 18\(^\text{th}\) century, argues Stephen Jones. Starting from 14\(^\text{th}\) to 18\(^\text{th}\) century Georgian kingdoms have lived under strong cultural influence of Islamic empires. As discussed in the **2.1 Islam in Ajara region**, Georgian political elite of Ajara region was the first to convert to Islam. More than that many of Georgian royal families married into Muslim families and used Persian language for correspondence. However, Jones contends that the alienation with Islamic culture started in the 18\(^\text{th}\) century\(^\text{162}\) and it is then that Georgian political elite started to look at Orthodox Christianity as the main instrument in “preserving Georgian culture through the darkest period of Islamic occupation”\(^\text{163}\). Ketevan Gurchiani highlighted the same process and said that Georgian history books define Christianity of Georgians as “important marker of their identity, and constructs metaphors in which ‘Georianness’ is

\(^{160}\) The ‘Tatar’ notion is used not only in regard to ethnically Georgian Muslims, but also to ethnically Azebaijani population of Georgia.

\(^{161}\) Interview with Hurie Abashidze, p.81

\(^{162}\) It might have started earlier, but in the scientific literature 18\(^\text{th}\) century is the earliest account, to which this belief is attributed.

fused with Christianity”\textsuperscript{164}. Thus, frequently while speaking with Georgians one might here referral to Orthodox Christianity as ‘our Georgian’ religion. Gurchiani notes that starting from medieval times, those people who were ethnically Georgian but converted to another religion were no longer looked at as Georgians: this is how Georgian Catholics were referred to as ‘French’, Muslim Georgians as ‘Tatar’, and those baptized in an Armenian church, ‘Armenians’\textsuperscript{165}.

Besides, there is a strong belief in the Georgian society, that by adhering to Islamic religion, Georgian Muslims alienate themselves from Georgia and position themselves closer to Turkey. When in 1988, the border regime with Turkey became less rigid; it allowed the population to gain some economic benefits from the trade. However, Gamsakhurdia was rush in his judgments and concluded that Ajarans “self-assertiveness (long suppressed by Russian communism) indicated ‘pan-Turkish, pan-Islamic sentiments’\textsuperscript{166}. When asked whether Georgian Muslims should be allowed to build new mosque in Batumi, as it is one of the central political problems at the moment, Father Maxime said that this right is already granted. He added, that instead of advocating here in Georgia, Georgian Muslims should stand for the discrimination of Christian population in Turkey\textsuperscript{167}.

In the views of the population the minorities, be it ethnic or religious minorities, are viewed as ‘perennial guests’. This theme -‘minorities as guests’- was further exploited by the radical nationalists after the fall of the Soviet Union\textsuperscript{168}. It also in a way led to the self-view of Georgian Muslims as ‘first-class Georgians’. During his fieldwork in Ajara, Pelkmans asked the Laz man whether he would define himself as Georgian or Laz. The man replied: “I am both. Of course I am Laz, but at the same time I am Georgian – not just Georgian, a first-class Georgian”\textsuperscript{169}. In the interviews conducted by the author all the Muslim respondents brought this idea. In particular, Tariel Nakaidze asserted: “We

\begin{thebibliography}{99}

\bibitem{165} Ibid: 517
\bibitem{166} Forsyth, J. \textit{The Caucasus: A History}. Cambridge [etc.]: Cambridge University Press, 2013: 694
\bibitem{167} Interview with Maxime
\bibitem{168} Sabanadze, Natalie. \textit{Globalization and Nationalism the Cases of Georgia and the Basque Country}. Budapest ; New York: Central European University Press, 2010: 88
\end{thebibliography}
openly said that we were both Muslims and Georgians, we didn’t separate these two things or say that we belong to some other nation. *On contrary, because we are Muslims, we are even more true Georgians*”\(^{170}\).

Overall, this subchapter looked at the narratives which are present in the social and political discourse of Ajara region and Georgia.

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\(^{170}\) Interview with Tariel Nakaidze, p. 71
4. Conclusion

Prior to presenting the findings of this research, it is important to look at limitations that the author encountered while writing this thesis. The topic of Islam and nationalism includes many aspects, so certain sacrifices had to be made in order to fit in the time and word limits.

4.1 Limitations of the research

One of the most significant challenges that this research encountered was the scarcity of the literature on the history and identity of the Meskhetian Turks. This did not allow the researcher to conduct full comparative analysis of their case with the Ajaran Muslims.

This thesis could only have benefited with the further analysis of the question of belonging/non-belonging and identity of the Georgian Muslim community. A fieldwork trip and ethnographic study in Ajara and Meskheti regions of Georgia; in Artvin province of Turkey, where the descendants of *muhajirs* live up to this day; along with a trip to Ferghana Valley of Uzbekistan where some of the deported Meskhetian Turks are settled, would have enriched this paper. However, the paucity of time and lack of financial resources restricted this research.

Moreover, the inclusion of the range of respondents from wider social and economic groups, could have given better perspective and better understanding of all the variety of views that exist in regard to these two topics—nationalism and Islam—in Georgia and would lend further credibility to the findings of this thesis. Specifically, the interview with the Georgian politician, responsible for regulating current religious affairs, could have given the perspective of state officials and how different or similar it is to the perceptions of other people.

Besides, it is believed that the credibility of the research, that engages with qualitative methods, especially, in-depth interviews, could be enhanced from multiple interviewing of the respondents. Nonetheless, this prolonged engagement was not possible because of the scarcity of time of the researcher and of the interviewees though
results of each interview were used to further formulate questions for the next upcoming interviews.

Further, even though all the interviews were conducted one-to-one, there was one exception to it. Tariel Nakaidze was interviewed during the author’s short trip to Georgia in January 2018. The grandfather insisted on following me to the interview and listening to it: even though he did not comment or interrupt the discussion, his presence might have shaped the way Tariel Nakaidze was expressing his ideas.

Though constrained with above-mentioned limitations, this study gives valuable insight in understanding the narratives about Georgian Muslims; shows how and from time-period Christianity became linked to ‘Georgianess’. This is further presented in the findings.

4.2 Findings

In the late 1980s - early 1990s it was believed that the idea of nation-state would be left in the olden days. These dreams and aspirations were fed by the fall of the Berlin Wall, collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Many analysts and politicians believed that it was the new age for democracy. Francis Fukuyama’s “The End of History and the Last Man” (1992) is a good example of these hopes. In his book Fukuyama argued that the states in different parts of the world would gradually converge to the free-market economy and, consequently, capitalism and liberal democracies will prevail. The process that the world encountered was contrary to what was expected: instead of the eclipse of the idea of nation-state, there was “spectacular revival and rebirth” of it.

Most of the Post-Soviet countries - with an exception of the Baltic republics – met 1990s with rampant corruption, economic downfall and were plunged in the political crisis. The countries were going through complex and simultaneous transformations. When it comes to the Post-Soviet transitions, Jonathan Wheatley argues that they could be characterized as partial transitions, in which “some attributes of the political regime

change, while others remain the same”\textsuperscript{173}. In this sense, for the Post-Soviet countries, there was no end of history in Fukuyama’s sense, but more return of it. In the interview, Mathijs Pelkmans characterized legacies of the past in the following way: “People draw on historical legacies and enlarge them and try to enliven them”\textsuperscript{174}. The past adapts to the new reality and is being reinvented and reemphasized. This is why it was crucial to examine the history of the question of Islam and nationalism in Georgia (this was done in the second chapter) as this allowed to trace the Soviet past and legacies in the nowadays Georgia.

One of the legacies of the past is the vision of the Muslim population as a ‘threat’ to national security. This is shown in the Imperial, Soviet and Post-Soviet policies of deportation of Muslim population which lived in the borderlands. Further, the attempts to inhabit these areas with non-Muslim populations aimed at creating secure buffer zone between Georgia and its neighboring Muslim Empires.

Secondly, the idea of linking ‘Georgianness’ with Orthodox Christianity is not a recent phenomenon: since the medieval times people referred to non-Orthodox Georgians as ‘French’ (if they were Catholic), ‘Armenian’ (if they belonged to Armenian Apostolic Church) and ‘Tatars’ (if they were Muslims). However, this attempt to tie Georgian ethnicity to Orthodox Christianity entered the political sphere in the late 18\textsuperscript{th} century and reached its apogee after the fall of the Soviet Union, when Zviad Gamsakhurdia and his supporters made the Church a public and highly politicized symbol of Georgianness\textsuperscript{175}.

Thirdly, the evolution of the nationalist ideas was presented in this paper. 19\textsuperscript{th} century nationalism in Georgia was of moderate and emancipatory nature, which tended to be inclusive of the ethnic and religious minorities and what is important it was critical rather than self-congratulatory. However, the nationalism, which was nurtured within the Soviet system, and dominated political sphere of Post-Soviet Georgia had more radical stance and hold hostile attitude to the minorities.

\textsuperscript{174} Interview with Mathijs Pelkmans, p.85
Along with this, it is important to note that when in the 1990s Georgia was going through political crisis and civil war with its Autonomous republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, this tragic destiny was not shared by Ajaran Autonomous republic because of the identity that Ajaran political elite had. This identity was closely linked to Georgian one and even up to this day, whilst referring to themselves Ajarans frequently name themselves as Georgians or even ‘first-class’ or ‘true’ Georgians.

Last but not the least, Post-Soviet Ajara experienced number of significant transformations in the 1990s: there was trend of both Christianization and Islamization. These two processes also deepened because of the presence of religious institutions (be if from Georgian Orthodox Church or Islamic education centers) in the schools. Besides, Christianization process, as argued before, took place because of the notion that if one wanted to be Georgian, he/she should have been Orthodox Christian. Whilst Islam kept strong hold in Upper Ajara region, where people considered and still consider it to be integral part of their lives.

Overall, it can be said that Orthodox religion is part of national identity and this alliantes non-Orthodox and ethnically non-Georgian groups from state-building process.
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**Images**


Appendix

None of the interviewees was given questions in advance. However, they were made aware of the theme of the research. Prior to the start of the interview, I introduced myself and outlined the reasons why and how I became interested in the topic. I mentioned the fact that I was born in Georgia, but grew up in Russia and later returned to Georgia and lived there for one year. I believe because of this description my respondents viewed me as an outsider (with an exception of Mathijs Pelkmans), to whom they had to ‘explain how the things really were’.

Face-to-face interviews were chosen as they provided me with the eye contact, gestures, and emotions of the respondents. In this way, I could see how Hurie Abashidze smiled at my question “how did you decide to start wearing headscarf”, or the irritation of Father Maxime when I mentioned my Laz teacher who asked during the class “why can’t I be Muslim and be Georgian”.

As a researcher, initially I had doubts, as I was not sure if interviewing Hurie Abashidze, who is not holding high position in any NGO, religious or governmental institution would be appropriate for this thesis, but after speaking with her for one hour, my doubts disappeared. I realized that Hurie gave me different perspective of the question of Islam in Georgia. If it were not for her, I would not have a chance to know the ordeals that head-covered Muslims girls are daily going through in Georgia. She is an active voice of the young Georgian Muslims community. Hurie gave interviews to both local and international news agencies thus rising awareness of the public in regard to the problems that Georgian Muslims are facing.176

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Interview with Tariel Nakaidze (Batumi, Georgia, 27 January 2018)

A: I would like to start this interview with the question: could you please tell me more about yourself? If I am not mistaken you are the chairman of Georgian Muslim’s Organization? Could you please tell me whether you were born in the Muslim family or converted to Islam? Were you born in Batumi?

T: My name is Tariel Nakaidze. I was born in Khulo municipality, in the village Gegelidze. My parents are Muslims and our family traditionally was a Muslim religious family like some other families in the Ajara region. People in the Ajara region converted to Islam during the Ottoman rule, which lasted for three centuries. This is the time when the Islamization of the region started and we became part of it (this process -A.C.)

As for my education, I initially received my education in the village, and then continued studying in the school in Batumi. Then I went to Turkey, I prepared for one year and enrolled to Ankara State University to the faculty of Foreign Languages, specifically Oriental Studies.

I graduated from the university in 1999. I worked for a year in the Turkish Archive (prime-minister’s archive) and after that I came back to Batumi, where I worked in Research Institute and then in Batumi State University till the year of 2005.

As for the idea of why we have decided to establish Georgian Muslim Organization, this is the initiative of those young people who came from the religious, Muslim background. Some of us were theologists; some were from other professional backgrounds… (We have established this organization because – A.C.) There always was in front of us this idea of, even when I worked in Batumi State University, that being Muslim means being not Geor… Being Muslim equals to being ‘second class’ Georgian or not Georgian at all. This issue was always present in the Ajara region and increased even more after the fall of the Soviet Union. Nationalist sentiments replaced the two-faced Soviet atheism. During the communism, at home one could be a believer, but in public he/she would proclaim to be an atheist.

My family was very religious…But my father would always tell me to say at school that I wasn’t Muslim and that I did not believe in God even though I did. This problem was further fueled by the fact that we were borderland; neighboring Turkey…Thus the control here was stricter. For example, every year boy had to be checked…they were looking at whether the boys were circumsized or not. Also, the government would make sure that during Muslim festivities livestock should not be killed. I have seen all of this with my own eyes.

During Ramadan, one should wake up at night, before the sunrise, and eat then…These are fasting rules in Islam…And you should end up the fasting when the sun sets  [Tariel was saying this with explanatory voice – A.C.]. I remember how my parents
would put black cloth to the window so that no one from the outside sees the light, so that no one knows that my family wakes up at night to fast. [...] 

Why am I saying all of this? It is important to mention this attitude and existing situation which was even stonger within Muslim community. This two-faced nature of atheism was replaced with the Christianity after the fall of the Soviet Union. One should mention 1990-s and especially Zviad Gamsakhurdia’s stament which he made in Batumi. He said: “Ajarians you are also Georgians”. These words had a big impact on intelligentsia. They were interpreted under a different light...They were linked with the Georgianness. 

The words of the patriarch Illia II, that he said during his speech in Batumi in 1991, only fueled these sentiments: “If the person is not an Orthodox Christian, he/she is country’s enemy and traitor”. 

All of this had an impact on the Ajarians, especially Muslim Ajarians and Muslim intelligentsia... This intelligentsia was facing the same situation as in the Soviet times with the difference that now it is saying that it is Christian for the career prospects and for the public acceptance...It (intelligentsia – A.C.) still remains Muslim at home, but outside it calls itself Christian. Georgian Orthodox Church did not want this elitist group to be Muslim (slip of the tongue), Christian... They thought that their descendants, their children will be Christians [his idea is not clear in Georgian either – A.C.]... 

But yet many people converted to Christianity. I call it becoming Christian because of the ‘fashion’, ‘career Christianity’ of those whose main aim was to be promoted. Some of them were promoted, some of them were not. 

A: This processes of Christianization were among your generation or... 

T: It mainly happened among the people of the previous generation and among those who were approximately 5 years younger than me... This (Christianization – A.C.) is the narrative of the 1990s. There were some other social problems: poverty, the relations with Georgian Orthodox Church... 

When we graduated from the university (in Turkey – A.C.) and returned back… we, in the first place, went to Turkey for our studies because our chances to get education in Tbilisi were really limited. I tried enrolling to Tbilisi State University but I could not get in because of the simple reason - we did not have money and could not pay the fees necessary for the admission to the university. On contrary, it was much easier for us to enroll to Turkish university. We could not go to the other country, as we could not afford it. But we went to Turkey because it had a program for foreign students, not only Georgians but other students too. There was special examination for international students and it included a lot of technical information and math. So if you were smart enough it was quite easy to get accepted to any faculty in Turkish university. 

Also, it is important to mention financial aspect…Up to this moment it is much cheaper to study in Turkey than to study in Georgia because Turkish state universities are almost free of charge, so they are more accessible for the families with limited funds.
Moreover, the situation with scholarships is also really good. There are many funds that give educational scholarships... In short, it was a good chance for Ajarian Muslims. We also guided and helped those students who went after us (to study in Turkey – A.C.). We showed them that it is easy to enroll and to study in Turkey. The amount of money that you need here to prepare for the entrance examination, is more enough to cover tuition fee costs in Turkey. [..]

In Ajara region there are families in which there are Muslims and Christians. So we thought we could do something about it. But this led to another problem. Basically, we ended up being in conflict with the patriarchy...Maybe not with the patriarchy itself but with the plan (of Christianization – A.C.) that they had in minds for the region. We openly said that we were both Muslims and Georgians, we didn’t separate these two things or say that we belong to some other nation. On contrary, because we are Muslims, we are even more true Georgians. This led to the slowing down of the process of becoming Christian because of the prestige and to the confrontations with the Muslims.

In 2010 we had 30 female students from Khulo municipality, who were studying in the different universities of the country. They were accepted to Tbilisi State University – in the past an unprecedented thing for the girl from Khulo. Nowadays there are around 2500 students. From Khulo municipality this spread to Tsalka so now people from Tsalka are coming to us and we help them too. It is worth to note if it was initially hard to convince people, later the success of the students became ‘an advertisement’. Also, one should take into consideration local people’s mentality: if someone else’s daughter is studying why shouldn’t mine study too? We benefited a lot from this experience. People of my generation wanted to give education to all their children be it a girl or a boy. With this we managed to achieve some level of integration of Georgian Muslims in the Georgian society.

In 2012 when the government has changed... It is worth to say here that the attitude of the government is important in this discourse-creation. During the presidency of Saakashvili, the government was inclusive in the sense that we had a chance to start something...For example, if the notary bureau would not register us, we could appeal to the higher institutions and then establish the organization. We received legal norms that could defend us. But it was exactly Saakashvili’s government that tried to limit this activity, got scared of it and tried to create an official narrative within the Muslim community. For this purposes it (the government – A.C.) did not use public institutions but instead it went to law-enforcing agencies. This is how All Georgian Muslim Association (AMAG) was formed (with the help of security officers who were new little about lives of the Muslims.

We were working with the young people, we were teaching them the religion...we couldn’t protect them...and they have gone underground. They had a feeling that they would not be able to fight with this power so they had to save their
strength…Unfortunately, some of them became prey of the ISIS. They went to Syria and died there. They were quite talented boys and of course we regret…

When it comes to building a new mosque in Batumi, we made some good steps: first of all, we collected signatures. Secondly, we addressed the authority and asked them to give us a space where we could build a mosque. We didn’t receive any answer from the government regarding this issue. When it behaved so, we have decided that our government is not taking into consideration the aspirations of Muslims. While we received no answer, the patriarchy was given thousands of square meters of land.

So we had decided to buy the piece of land by ourselves and we did. After this we went to the city municipality in order to get the permission (to build a mosque – A.C.). This was an unprecedented thing for Georgia… For a religious institution to buy a land and build mosque officially with the permission…By the way, some churches are built without any permission in Georgia. But we received in response to our request we received “no”. This “no” triggered other events and we have decided to open the mosque in the open air.

Now, after 1990s, we have a Golden Age of Islam in Georgia…That’s how I call it…And history will say about this one day… But along with this we are facing couple of serious problems. First of all, the Muslim community is uneducated (in the religious sense – A.C.). So we would like to give them a true version (ideas) of Islam rather then giving them radical ideas of it. Right now we have an opportunity to give them a genuine vision of Islam. This is what we tell the government all the time…We ask them not to take this opportunity from our hands. They should stand by our side instead of imposing regulations. Nowadays all the Muslim theologians in Georgia receive education abroad in Turkey or Arab countries.

A: I want to ask you a question about the Muslim community. On average, are there more men or women in the mosque? Or in terms of the age which age group is more present?

T: By looking at the age group of the people who attend mosques we can say what age redistribution is there among believers. If we speak about the contemporary situation in Batumi’s central mosque [often referred as “old mosque” – A.C.], the redistribution is as follows: 60% of the people are younger than 35; 20% of the people belong to the age 35 to 45 years old (which is my generation – T.N.); people who are older than 45 but up to 70 constitute approximately 5% of the believers. The rest are old people.

Why is the situation like this? Here it is worth to note the movement that we have started. Those who are younger than 35, had or still have religious classes at schools/boarding schools. Almost in every village, municipality or the city where Muslims live they have religious education [inconsistent with what he said before – A.C.].

People of my generation, some of them, had a chance to receive religious education, but those who are older than me grew up under the communism and new
almost nothing about the religion. Those who are more than 70 years old are too old and don’t want to attend prayer ceremonies in the mosque. Now sometimes there are instances when the child goes to the mosque and father does not.

A: What do you think, is there a generation gap among the Muslim community? You mentioned that there are families where the father might not attend the mosque but the son does. Or let’s say the cases when the father is Muslim and the son is Orthodox…

T: We don’t have a generation gap. There is another type of experience in our community. Son can be a Christian, father – Muslim and might go to the mosque. The only thing that causes some disagreements among generation is the difference in the religious education. The older generation knows Islam by word of mouth. The younger one has received a religious education. This is what causes misunderstanding.
A: Could you please tell me more about yourself? How did you and why did you decide to become a priest?

M: It was part of the searching process. When I was a student, I was part of the national liberation movement. Back at that time our minds were preoccupied with the patriotic ideas, with the ideas of freedom. And this coincided with the reevaluation of our values and moral system.

What we were fighting for, we received it... We gained freedom and independence. After these there were a lot of confrontations within the liberation movement. People who I cared about started to confront each other. This disappointed me... I have decided to be in such a position where Georgia would be [inaudible] for me.

Gradually I started to become religious. The Church (Georgian Orthodox Church – AC) seemed to be the most humiliated institution by the Communist government. Along with thinking about all of this, I started to think about eternal ideas: about the God, the purpose of life... Step by step I came closer to the faith... After the number of fasts and prayers. There also was a sign from the God. Not only I but also my brothers chose this path. All three of us became Orthodox priests. [...]  

A: Father Maxime, in the 1980s in Georgia there was national movement. Could you say that you were part of it?

M: Yes, I can say that I was actively participating in it. Before I went to the army, I was studying in the university. In the years from 1984 to 1986 there were no protests on the streets, but the spirit of protest and discussions (about independence of Georgia – AC) were already there. This was our attempt of determining and understanding who we are.

When I came back from the army in 1988, I encountered already active and vibrant movement. One could see it from the TV, in the streets (of Tbilisi – AC). So I joined them too. And already in 1991 I became a student of the Seminary. For these three years, from 1988 to 1991 I was active in the protest movement...to the extent that my father received a notice telling him to be careful as his son (Father Maxime –AC) was engaged in these things.

I have met with all the leaders of the movement...some of them at the demonstrations, others at supras (festivities)...people like Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Merab Kostava.

A: Father Maxime, how did the ‘ideal Georgia’ look like for the active supporters of the national movement? They wanted to be independent from the USSR, but I would like to know what was Georgia they were dreaming about? [...] 

M: This national government lasted only for couple of years and after that many people called them fascists... But it’s not true! They were dreaming about really modern Georgia. There hearts were filled with patriotic sentiments. But there was this one group, [...] which was known for its too liberal values. I did not like them. Nonetheless, there were people with national-democratic values and ideas. I cannot say that there was
anything excessive in their actions (in the actions of the national movement - AC). [inaudible]. During the Soviet era, the population did not know its history…We lost the whole century because of the Communists.

These people (members of the national movement – AC) saw this. I was 21 years old during those times and thanks to them I had an opportunity to learn real Georgian history. It was like a remedy for my soul. […]

A: Father Maxime, some authors say that the national movement, in order to oppose to the atheist ideology of the Soviet Union, started to bring to the forefront the Christianity. Would agree with this opinion? Could you say that there was merge of the national movement and of the Georgian Orthodox Church?

M: Yes, it is possible to say that they started to put forward Christian values. Because our identity lays within it (Christianity – AC). In spite of the fact that we have Georgian Muslims, we have atheists; nationality is formed by the religion. For twenty centuries we have been a Christian country and of course these values were brought forward. However, this does not mean that in Ajara or in other places where Georgian Muslims live, they were not part of this national movement. Initially, there was no conflict between different parts of Georgia (regarding the question of independence from the USSR – AC), but then this conflict erupted from the outside.

[…] A: I have read that in one of his speeches, Zviad Gamsakhurdia addressed Ajarians in this way: “Dear Ajarians, you are also Georgians”. Many Ajarians felt being left out from the nation building process because of these words.

M: Yes, but this is just one word (‘also’ – AC). It is a fact that national movement was encompassing the whole Georgia. […]

A: Father Maxime, as I know in the 1990s interesting process was ongoing in Ajara region. Some of the Georgian Muslims started to convert to Christianity. Was it coming from the people? Or was it the result of the Church’s actions?

M: I think it was both. These sentiments were coming from the people and the Church was happy about it. Individual should look at his/her historical past. For centuries Ajarians were under the Turkish rule. It is evident that they were forced to convert to Islam. In some parts of the Northern Caucasus, people had to accept Islam because it was forced on them. Christianity meanwhile had a longer history in Georgia. History creates everything. When people look at their history and traditions, then they make choice according to it.

A: I would like also to ask you about one issue that is important for the local population. In the late 1990s – early 2000s, part of the population of Ajara region started to express their wish to build a new mosque in Batumi. […] Up to this day,

177 Father Maxime shares the widespread belief that the Abkhazian conflict was shaped by Russian political elite in order to create instability in the country.
there are debates about whether there should be built new mosque in Batumi. What do you think about this? […]

M: As I know there is an agreement about building new mosque but not in the city center of Batumi, but in the outskirts. Along with this, there is a plan to build a cathedral in Batumi, as they don’t have one.

I don’t think this (building mosque – AC) is impossible thing. However, one should look at how honest these goals are. Sometimes when Muslim leaders make public speech, they say, “I would like to live in such democratic Georgia, where all the religions will be equal”. Why does he announce it here? Why not to go to Turkey and say “I would like to live in such Turkey, which gives equal rights to all the religions”. In this kind of speeches I don’t see honesty. Why should preach this in Georgia? Go and preach as a Muslim in Turkey. Why not to say, “I would like to live in such Turkey where the rights of Christians are well protected”. For example, no one gives us the permission to have a service in Azerbaijan, in Saingilo. It is limited to have a service even in the already built cathedrals. We have mosques there where Azerbaijanis live. […] If you preach here, you should preach in Turkey then too. […]

In this respect, I think the EU is going to the right.

After the Rose Revolution, United National Movement took out Christian religion studies from the school syllabus. For 13-14 years children are not studying Christian theology. In all countries of the EU they teach religious studies […]. This is really bad thing that our government did. I see the grave mistake of the government and politicians in this. Now they want to return it (Christian religion studies –AC) but now it is difficult to do this.

Some people say that the education should be secular. This is nonsense! In the EU they have it everywhere. […]

A: What do Christian religion studies encompass as a school subject?

M: It should include Christian views on the creation of the world; Christian views about the God; about the Holy Trinity; Jesus Christ. […] I was teaching this Christian religion studies in the schools in the 1990s and thus was showing my patriotism to the country. […] 90% of our population are Orthodox Christians; are baptized and married in the churches; that is why it is necessary for the children to know more about the Christian religion. Why? Children have many questions like: how did the life appear? Who is God? What is life and what is death?

Just because there are, let’s say, two Chechens in the classroom…two Muslims because of this not to teach Christian religion…I don’t think this is right. No one asks him to baptize, or to wear the cross, but why not to know about Christianity? […]

A: In the recent years, there are protests of young people in Georgia who organize “Georgian march”. They claim to be against immigrants, but in general they have really strong anti-Islamic sentiments. They justify themselves by referring to Christian religion. What do you think about all of this?
M: I think that if there are radical protests in Georgia, they are because of radical liberalization. When there is done nothing in regard to this problem (of migrants come to Georgia – AC), when the state does not regulate all of this, then we have what we have. It is not acceptable that one whole street in Tbilisi (Marjanishvili street – AC) is in hands of Turks and Iranians and that Georgian people are afraid of going to that street. This causes aggression. The government should be able to regulate. It should settle migrants next to each other […].

A: This would be my last question then. What do you think of those words that my Laz teacher once told me? That “Why cannot I be Georgian if I am Muslim”?

M: Why does he pose such a question?

A: He said that usually Georgianness is linked with Christianity…

M: This is not correct. I think he has inferiority complex. Why, if we were atheists during the Soviet time, we were no longer Georgians then? He should take and read some books about what is nationality. Nationality is not defined by religion, or language or territory. None of this defines nationality separately. Nationality is formed by culture which includes everything that nation has. The soul of the nation is its culture. Georgian culture defines Georgian identity and not religion. […] I have never looked at Ajarians as of people of different ethnicity. I always considered them Georgians.

In the past they would refer to Catholic Georgians as Frangebi (French people – AC) and they were defining people according to their religion not their nationality and so on… Educated person would not look differently at Catholic Georgian, Muslim Georgian or atheist Georgian. All of them are Georgians.
A: May I start this interview with asking you to tell me more about yourself?
H: I was born and grew up in Upper Ajara, specifically in Khulo. I finished my bachelor studies in Turkey. I studied psychology there. Right now I am studying at master program of Clinical Psychology at Ilia State University. I am active in organizing trainings related to religion.

A: Would you say that during the Soviet times Islam became ‘underground’ religion? That Islamic rituals were not publicly displayed?
H: Yes, this is true. Muslims usually pray in the mosques, especially on Fridays. Also, during Ramadan, we usually wake up at 4 am in the morning to pray and eat the meal. Following these rituals was impossible during the Soviet time.

During the Soviet times, if someone would see that a child is fasting, they would be forced to drink water. Also, when Muslims would wake up for the night meal during the Ramadan, they would not turn on lights, or they would usually put really thick curtains on the windows so that nobody could see the light inside. There was no trust in the community. […] Women could not wear veils.

A: If I may ask, did you grow up in the religious family?
H: Yes, my family was religious. My grandfather was imam. He organized religious lessons at home for the children. These lessons would usually be late at night or early in the morning. My father learned from him. And by the time I was born, there no longer was this problem. I was born in 1992 so when I started to delve into religion, this problem of persecution no longer existed.

A: How and why did you decide to start wearing headscarf?
H: (smiled at my question)

A: Was this followed by some kind of negative attitude from the society or your peers?
H: I started to wear headscarf when I was studying in the university. It took me a lot of time to make this decision. The main reason of my doubts was the society: I did not know how the society would react to this. […]

When it comes to negative sentiments, yes there was and still is negative attitude. I frequently hear insults and negative comments. But know I just learned not to pay attention to it anymore. I am wearing headscarf for 5 years now so I got used to it. […] There was no negativity from my close friends. They only supported me. The same attitude was from my family too.

But when it comes to the society… I hear a lot of insults in the public transport. Sometimes people stop me and ask me where I am from. When I say that I am Georgian, they would smile back and say “Oh you are Georgian? Georgians are Christian Orthodox”. So basically one has to prove everyday that it is possible to be Georgian and along with this to belong to different religion. Religion is something you chose yourself
but you cannot choose your ethnicity or the place you are born. When I say this, people usually say - “yes, it is possible to belong to different religion. But don’t you want to become Orthodox? By the end of the day we are Georgians and we should be Orthodox Christians” When you reply back “thank you, but I don’t want to be Orthodox” then the reaction is harsh. They usually say “you are already directed towards Turkey and want to be closer to it”. The fact that we are considered to be ‘Tatars’ is a widely known thing.

A: Have anybody ever called you or your relatives ‘Tatar’?

H: Yes, people have called me that and they have called my relatives Tatars too.

A: May I clarify this: they call you Tatar because of the religion or because they think that you are of different ethnicity? What would you say?

H: In this case, no one considers you to be ethnically Tatar. But in terms of religion yes you are Tatar… You cannot draw line between religion and ethnicity in this case.

Ajara was part of Turkey back in the past…during 300 terrible years. This legacy of the past gives us this name. If you are Ajarian and you are Orthodox, then you are Georgian. But if you are Muslim and Ajarian then you are Tatar. […]

A: I have read in the several books that Islam came to Ajara, especially to Upper Ajara in the 19th century. Political elite of the region converted to Islam earlier, but the population became Muslim in 19th century. But then there is contradicting information: some authors say that because of late Islamization, the religion did not manage to instill itself in the life of people, while others say that it became an integral part of everyday life. What would you say?

H: I would agree with the second variant. If the religion was just formality, then it would not be present up to this day. People would destroy the mosques after becoming part of Georgia (in the late 19th century – AC).

But people kept this religion. People usually say, that converting to Islam was the only mean of survival for Ajarans as they would be killed otherwise. But if we look closer, we will see that by the time Ajarans became Muslim, it no longer was the mean for survival but it was personal choice.

A: I would like also to ask you about the process of conversion to Christianity that took place in Ajara after the fall of the Soviet Union? How did it occur and what effects did it have on Ajara region?

H: After the fall of the Soviet Union, the active process of church building took place. Also, religious (Orthodox –AC) schools were built and in the recent years the university was built in Shuakhevi, which should be an educational institution, but instead it is used for propagating Christianity. Sometimes Muslin students are told, if you change your religion, we will reduce tuition fee. […]

Besides, at one time-period they were saying that if you want to be considered as Georgian, then you should baptize. And some people followed this trend.

178 Georgian word ubeeduri was used here.
Church building is still ongoing in the region. They were trying to build a church in Didachara, which is the place, from where Saint Nino came to Georgia. [...] Christina religion was spread from Didachara. But the population opposed to this initiative. And there were some rumors that money was offered in return for some land where the church would be built. But the people went against it and then they were told, that “you are not Georgians because if you were ones then you would not protest against this idea”.

When it comes to the process of Christianization, there usually are two trends: some people wholeheartedly believe and would like to become Christians. But, sometimes, people covert to Christianity because of their friends and because of the society. This is the way to be seen as Georgian and not Tatar.

A: Would you say that some people become Christians for career purposes? I have received such opinion too

H: Unfortunately, yes this is true. We Georgians have difficulty in accepting and seeing ourselves the way we are. And just in order to be liked at job, or to be accepted there, we are willing to take such steps (conversion –AC) too.

Some people hide their religious identity and do not say that there are Muslims, or usually they convert to Christianity. I know people who accepted Christianity just to be employed.

A: You said that you received your bachelor degree in Turkey. You received some sort of scholarship for this? Or your parents sponsored your education?

H: Turkey has a state program, which gives full scholarships to students, which includes accommodation, tuition fee, and monthly stipend. This was the reason I went abroad: I did not want to depend on my family and to be financial burden. I passed state exams in Georgia, but unfortunately I have decided to go to Turkey because of the financial reason.

A: Do I understand correctly, that nowadays, it is easier for Ajarian youth to get education in Turkey rather than in Georgia? And this is mainly because of financial reasons?

H: Yes, I could definitely say so. If you need to go from Ajara to Tbilisi, you are not financially independent. Because you have to find a job in order to finance your own education or you are dependent on your parents who give the last piece of bread to help you.

Around 30 students go to Turkey with this program every year and they are not only from Ajara but also from whole Georgia. Turkey can be an option but it is not the only option that Ajarians have. Many European universities have good scholarship programs. If I had known back then about them, I would not have chosen Turkey and would have gone to European university instead, where I could receive better education.

But Georgia cannot support students in such a way that they do not need to think about financially supporting themselves, instead of studying.

A: What are the problems that Georgian Muslims encounter nowadays?
H: One of the biggest problems that Georgian Muslims are facing at the moment is the mosque-building initiative. Our Constitution says that I can perform prayers at any place I want to, and follow any religion that I want to, but the state does not give me this right.

We bought the land (in Batumi - AC). We even had project ready, but we received no as an answer. First, they told us that this project does not fit in the architectural style of the city. Second, we were told that we choose a wrong place for mosque construction. Next excuse was that “we gave the land to Samufio and you were supposed to build mosque there”. But no one openly says about the real reason. No one says that, you know what, we don’t really want to give you permission to build the mosque and you can go and pray wherever you want.

Then we were told that we could extend the old mosque in Batumi. But this is impossible as the mosque is surrounded by the blocks of flats and this extension would lead to their destruction. […]

Another problem is… And I think this is the most important one…is that we are not seen as Georgians. This idea that person of different faith can also be Georgian is unacceptable for them. We steal their ‘Georgianness’. […]

When it comes to women, there is also another problem – wearing headscarves. You should be constantly ready that someone will insult you. Men usually don’t have this problem.

Also, there is problem of employment. When they post vacancy that they are looking for someone it is written there that one should have ‘good appearance’ and we don’t fit in this because of wearing headscarf.

If you look at state jobs, there is also none for head covered women. When I graduate from my master program, I cannot go and work in the public schools in Tbilisi…the situation is of course different in Upper Ajara and in Khulo as nobody pays attention to this there…but in Tbilisi I am 100% sure that I will receive no only because of wearing headscarf. They will tell me, “if parents of the children see you in headscarf what will they think about all this”. It is the matter or ‘keeping’ your image and reputation. […]

For example, at the moment I work as a translator in Turkish company. Why should I be a translator, if I can work as psychologist? In the minds of people this aliens you with Turks. First you are Muslim, second you work for Turkish company. When you say that you have problems with employment in other places, they usually reply, “try harder and you will find”.

Then we are accused of wanting to be with Turks. Even though this is not true, this is not something we want.

A: What could Georgian government do for Georgian Muslims?

H: The easiest thing that the government can do is to say openly that “yes, you are a Muslim, but along with this you are Georgian”. They usually tell us, that we are good people. No one needs these insincere sentiments.
Also, the second thing is, those Muslim girls who wear headscarves, should be protected against discrimination especially when it comes to their employment. […]

Besides, when you say that religious symbols should not be present in governmental institutions, then do not display crosses and icons too. […]

Or also Muslim child should not be forced to say Lord’s Prayer every day when he/she goes to school.

A: I didn’t know this. Classes usually start with Lord’s Prayer?
H: Yes, there is Lord’s Prayer, then making the sign of the cross, and organizing school trips to the churches. […]

A: I would also like to ask you about another ethnically Georgian Muslim group…about the Meskhetian Turks. As you know many of them were deported during the Soviet times. There are many speculations regarding their ethnicity – some people say they are Georgians, others that they are Turks, or that they are mix of both.

H: Turkish Meskhs live in Samtskhe-Javakheti, it’s true.

A: So Turkish Meskhs are not ethnically Georgians?
H: No, they are not.

A: Because there is still scholarly debate about this…
H: David the Builder brought these tribes to Georgia and they were referred as Tatars initially. And they consider themselves to be Tatars. They don’t have any problems with this denomination. They say that yes they are Turkish Meskhs. […]

There were some talks about the separatist sentiments in that region (in Meskheti region –AC). They wanted to break away from Georgia as Abkhazia and South Ossetia did.

A: You mean this was happening in the 1990s?
H: Yes, and also in the 2000s there were some instances of it. We attended one event in Turkey and we saw Georgian map, from which Meskheti region was torn away…Three parts were removed – South Osetia, Abkhazia and Samtskhe regions

A: As I know in terms of the representation of Muslims, there are two main organizations that represent interests of the Muslim community in Georgia – Georgian Muslims Union and Samufto.
H: But mainly there is Georgian Muslims Union, which is leading this initiative of mosque building in Batumi and Samufto […] which is closely related to the government.

A: Could you name any political party that has Muslim problems as part of its agenda?
H: No, there is none that comes to my head.

A: Do I understand correctly that Samufto is representing all Muslims in Georgia? Not only ethnically Georgian Muslims?
H: Yes, they unite all Muslims in Georgia.
A: In 2014, when events started to unfold in Syria and when Islamic State started to expand in the region, as I know there was radicalization of some young Muslim people from Georgia. I know that this was more acute problem in Pankisi Gorge, but what about Ajara region?

H: Yes, there were some young boys from Pankisi and from Ajara. Nobody knows what was the real reason they went there (to fight for the Islamic State). Terrorists work really well with novice people, who just became religious.

These people usually think that this radicalization is the right path and this is the only way to defend your religion. Those boys who went there…nobody could believe that these boys could end up in such a situation. Regarding Pankisi Gorge, I don’t really know but it is said that the radicalization was stronger there then in Ajara. Only 2-3 boys went to fight for IS from Ajara.

A: This radicalization of these young boys happened primarily because of socio-economic reasons? Or…

H: These boys who went there went first to Turkey and then to Syria. Initially, these boys went to Turkey for job opportunities. From there they ended up in Syria. So in a way initially it was socio-economic reason. You know how bad the economic situation is in Georgia. Some people said that they were offered money and that’s why they went, but I don’t know this for sure so it would not be right if I say this.

A: Could you say that there is generation gap and conflict between generations in Ajara?

H: In Ajara, Muslims kept their religion well in spite of the pressure from the Soviet government. […] Here we have this kind of situation. People would usually fast and pray the way their forefathers were fasting and praying. But my generation and those who are a bit older or younger, they are not fully aware of what they are doing. Some people like it and say, “what we were doing wrong, you are doing it right now”. But sometimes it also causes some arguments.

There are also some problems within families when children are Christians and parents are Muslims. Also, this problem is usually aggravated when it comes to intermarriage between people of different religion. This problem occurred recently because children are now leaving their home villages and hometowns in Ajara and there is a problem of them returning back to the region.

A: This would be my last question. What could European states take from Georgia’s experience? When it comes to interaction of Christians and Muslims, is there anything that the Western countries could look at and follow our example?

H: When I am saying that some Christians in Georgia are unfair to us, I do not mean all of them. There are people with whom you never feel like this is the person of different religion. In all this negativity, which is around, you find so many good people that you have hopes that some day we will overcome these problems. This new generation pays less attention to who belongs to which religion and they look at
personality first. This is something Europe could look at. Young people in general don’t look at who has what religion.

But they shouldn’t learn from us humiliating other religions, humiliating other people in general. I think we take more from Europe then Europe takes from us. I think in Europe the attitude to Muslims is not this radical…it could be, of course, but it is not so aggravated as in this one little country.

It’s sad but sometimes people ask you such questions, and talk with you in such a way, that it breaks your heart. You cannot be thinking only about yourself and about no one else. […] We don’t have that much of mutual respect, unfortunately. People sometimes tell me, “this is my country and I don’t want you to be here”. Well, in this cases I usually reply, “I am sorry but I am not going to leave”.

A: […] Now this will definitely be my last question to you. One year ago “Georgian march” was founded. Are the activities of this group directed against migrants or against Georgian Muslims too?

H: When there were protests in support of Basiani club, we could really see that there is threat to us too. This is my opinion. When I protest against something, let’s say against halting process with mosque construction, I know that ‘Georgian march’ will be there on the other side and they might even use force against us.

The way they protested against LGBT community on May 17th (2013 – AC), how they counter-protested against Basiani supporters…all these are worrying signs. They keep proclaiming that Georgians are Orthodox Christians and that is it. Which means, if I would like to do something and to protest against something, I might not have a chance to do it.

When all these events were happening I was trying not to go outside. I did not want to be caught in some provocations so I stayed at home. […] What saddens me is the support that they receive from the priests. You as a religious person should not incite violence against anyone. But in the recent times, one hears many announcements from the priests in regard to people of different ethnicity or different religion.

This is bad because priests are usually considered to be role models in Georgia. When the priests are disseminating hate speech, people believe them.

Yesterday, for example, I listened to the priest, who was saying, that [smiling uncomfortably - AC] “Only Orthodox Christians have really beautiful faces; all the rest resemble to devils and dolls”. This phrase disappointed me a lot. This is not even funny anymore, because I know that this could be part of my everyday reality. When I go out and if anyone calls me devil, I will not be even surprised then.
A: Thank you for agreeing to have an interview with me. My first question would be, do you think religious and civic nationalism that the country is experiencing at the moment is the legacy of its Soviet past or it’s the legacy of the First Georgian republic (1918 to 1921)?

M: It’s a very good question and I don’t think there is simple answer to that. You could say that Georgia has followed the path that many of the post-Soviet republics have followed. There was upsurge of nationalism in which religion became directly linked to the ideas of the nation. That happened in Armenia and in the Central Asian republics. Particularly so in Georgia too, because it is the country in which religious and national imaginary coincide relatively nicely in the sense that Georgia can imagine itself as being surrounded by Muslims, Islamic regions and countries or different kind of Christians such as Armenia. That’s quite convenient! People draw on historical legacies and enlarge them and try to enliven them. Georgian republic, the period just before the Soviet Union was established, that has loomed very large in the national imagination.

So it is kind of both. You have to ask questions: is the situation that we are confronting now, is it direct effect of the past? Or direct legacy of the past? Or is the past being a role, is it being reinvented and reemphasized. When it comes to pre-Soviet past, it has played an important role for both political and religious leaders in Georgia.

A: Regarding this pre-Soviet past, I would like to ask you what is your opinion about the pre-Soviet past of Ajara region. Authors say that Islamization of Ajara region took place in the 19th century. But how they interpret this differs: Tomas Hoch argues, that it “failed to instill in Ajarians lasting political and cultural identity”. Other scholars disagree with this. They say that even though it occurred only in the 19th century, still it managed to become an integral part of their everyday life. What is your opinion?

M: It’s not right to think that if people have been Christians or Muslims for 200 years, it’s going to play larger role then if they have been Christians or Muslims for 30 years or 40 years. I think that often what you see when you look at the process of the conversion is that the first period after conversion people are especially zealous to live according to that religion. I think that this conversion process, once it happens it can have a large impact on people’s lives. When you look at Ajara, sure the conversion to Islam was drawn out process which was not completed until the mid 19th century or even late 19th century. Within that process, from 1877 to 1918, the religion became heavily politicized. Here one should look at muhajiroba and at the number of people who emigrated to the Anatolian heartland. It shows that the religion played very important role, which doesn’t mean that there were no Christian traces, traditions and rituals. But people no longer thought of these rituals and traditions as Christian or they not
necessarily thought of this as Georgian either. They most probably saw this as their local way of doing things.

My opinion is that Islam played an important role in everyday life in Ajara. […] And it was so up until the 1930s after that Islam either disappeared or went underground.

If you go in the places in Upper Ajara like Ghorjomi, beyond Khulo, there was a vibrant religious network that played a role throughout the Soviet period. It regained strength and public role again after the collapse of the Soviet Union with lots of people studying in Turkey or Egypt or other places. […]

A: This process of getting education abroad, it was present during your fieldwork too?

M: Yes, it was definitely there. It started in the early 1990s. What happened basically was, there was no Internet, but there would be some relatively affluent people from Turkey or from elsewhere who were devout Muslims; who would work for Muslim charities, they would come to Ajara, they would visit religious leaders there and they would say that they have possibility of sending some people to university in Cairo, in Turkey or elsewhere. It was through these personal visits that the contacts were established. Young men were invited to study and then they would come back and after 5 years they would be the best educated in the religious sense young men. There views of the Islam were quite different of the local Muslim leaders. This generated some tensions.

A: What about the headscarves? When you were doing your fieldwork in Ajara, were women wearing headscarves back then? Now when Muslim women start wearing hijab, they face insults and accusations. So it is interesting to know if this was there before. Did you encounter this?

M: You did not really see modern hijab. In Ghorjomi people did wear traditional kind of chadri…some women did…in which you couldn’t see the woman. There was this custom, that whenever a man would approach, the woman would turn around so that you could not see them, especially if it is not relative. The modern hijab of what they are talking now, it looks different and it looks foreign I guess for people in Georgia. The population sees that as a new form of Islamization, which was not present in the 1990s. That is a new thing. I am not surprised that when women start to wear hijab, that they are facing this kind of negative responses.

A: I also would like to ask you about the conversion to Christianity. Mainly it took place in the coastal part of Ajara region rather than Upper Ajara? Or it was all over the region?

M: It is difficult to say…On the one hand, it was more widespread in the coastal regions than in Upper Ajara. In Ajara you have several villages, which are close to the coast, but there people who were resettled from Upper Ajara are living. In some of them there are very little conversions. On the other hand, in some of the places of Upper Ajara, like Khulo, in the town itself, there was quiet a bit of conversion going on. This was
partly also related to the Christian Seminary which was established there. The activities of the Church […]

A: When you were there in the late 1990s-2001, did you have an opportunity to speak with the people who converted to Christianity? If yes, what did they say? Why did they make this decision?

M: There were clear patterns: the people who converted tended to be from the middle class during the Soviet time. They were teachers, nurses, doctors…not so much peasants who worked on the land. It was also quite clear that those who converted were the people who were partial outsiders: people with incomplete families, where their grandfather was executed or repressed during the 1930-1940s. Especially among people of this kind of background, the conversion was common. When I talked with them, asking why did they convert to Christianity, they would always emphasize, that the Christianity was the original religion of Georgians. They presented this as a learning process. This coincided with them having gone through Georgian education, becoming more familiar with the idea that Georgian nationality and Christianity are closely linked. Many people have studied in Batumi, in Tbilisi; these people usually were more likely to convert.

A: Did you encounter the phenomenon of ‘fake conversions’? This is the term used by some of my Georgian Muslim respondents. They were saying, that people converted to Christianity because of career opportunities?

M: I have heard about the fake conversions. At one point there was this story, that if people convert, they would be paid in gold or something like that. Many people converted that this was kind of fake conversion, because they would never go to church afterwards.

Then, most of the conversions had intertwinements of all kind of reasons. Often they would speak about it in terms of feeling more at home in kind of Christian context. […] Often this conversion was linked to the idea of Christianity being the truth. People would speak about having revelations and dreams of ancestors who were Christians. These material reasons for converting they often coincided or they became interestingly combined with the spiritual reasons. […]

This process is much more complex then just naming something as fake or not fake conversion, a variety of factors come together. […]

[We were discussing the idea of first-class Georgians, which Mathijs Pelkmans encountered in his study of the Laz community. But people who would speak about being first-class Georgians, they would refer to the past, to the kingdom of Lazika and its influence on early Georgian state. These people would also convert to Christianity]

[ […] Among the Ajarians in Upper Ajara the idea was…if you spoke with devote Muslim, they would say that the religion and nationality are separate and you shouldn’t mix them. They would say we can be Georgians and be Muslims.
They tried to respond or react against this idea, that to be Georgian is to be Christian. But this is really strong narrative. Their counter argument worked within their community, but it was relatively powerless outside as this national discourses are much more hegemonic they have much more power. […]

Pridon Khalvashi wrote this book, in which he asks “Can a Muslim be Georgian?” He comes to the conclusion that it is very difficult to be Muslim and Georgian at the same time.

A: I will try to find this book. This is the last question: it’s about the Meskhetian Turks. The question of their origin is vague: some people say that there are Georgians, others that they are Turks, others as they are mix of both. Is it appropriate to speak about them while speaking about Muslims and Islam in Georgia?

M: They moved to Central Asia. Some of them revisited in the 1990s, but then they decided that there was no way they could find the place where to live. Whether to consider them Georgians or Turks, it’s the question of origin…but I don’t know how relevant that is if they no longer speak Georgian. If they are Muslim, if they don’t have memory of their Georgian past then…But you cannot do much more beyond that.
A: Good afternoon! Thank you for agreeing to give me an interview. Could you please tell me more about yourself?

B: I was born in Batumi, in Khelvachauri district. I am originally from the village Khulo, Upper Ajara, but I grew up in Khelvachauri district, where I went to school. After this I went abroad for my studies, to Turkey, to study religion. We didn’t have alternative to this.

All of my forefathers were Muslims. That’s why I have decided to study religion. I was 14 years old when I started studying religion. I went to Turkey and studied there. Then I graduated from the program of Oriental Philology. After this I started working in the mosque as the head of the mosque. I was Khelvachauri district’s mufti. [...] For four years now I am the head of Muslims living in Georgia. I received MA degree in Turkey, in Rize. I serve my country, I serve my Georgian Muslims. For the last 27 years I am the head of all this…There were many Muslims around me and we have never considered that if we were Muslims we were not Georgians. We are Georgians. We have Georgian blood. That’s why we should not look at this question from the perspective that if someone is not Orthodox Christian, then the person is not Georgian. We should separate religion from the ethnicity. One could be Georgian and be Catholic, or be Georgian and be… I will give you the most radical example… be Jehovah Witness. [...] I am the mufti of Georgian Muslims. As you have patriarch, the same way we have muftis. We also have in Georgia the leader of Azerbaijani Muslims. Our Samufto includes Shia and Sunni Azerbaijani Muslims and Sunni Georgians. We don’t have conflict with one another. Nowadays in Georgia we have a good understanding…unlike in different parts of the world… You see that in Syria Sunni and Shia Muslims confronted each other… This conflict is artificially created because as you can see by looking at Georgia’s example it is possible for us to coexist.

A: Mr. Beglar, you said that you were 14 years old when you became religious. Does it mean that you started to express your religious feelings during the Soviet times?

B: The Soviet system was already crumbling at that moment… I started to attend prayers in the mosque in 1988. My grandfather was religious and he was also mufti, as well as my father. Many people in my family were muftis… For example, my cousins are also muftis.

A: But how did you express religiosity during the Soviet time? As I know…

B: Of course, there were some problems… My grandfather was worried of bringing me to the mosque… Back then the elderly people could go to the mosque, but not the young ones. [...] A: What were the processes that Ajara region was going through in the late 1980s-1990s?
B: Old mosques were opened again. During the Soviet times, they (mosques – AC) were used as cinema clubs, as storage space. But when the Soviet regime started to fall apart, Georgian Muslims started to open religious place in their villages, small towns. […] After 1992 they started to actively reopen mosques in the Upper Ajara. I supervise at the moment 182 mosques in Georgia. These are the mosques where Georgian Muslims go. There are around 100 mosques, which belong to Shia and Sunni Azerbaijani and to Pankisi Gorge Muslims.

A: Do I understand correctly, that All Muslims Union (Samufto) encompasses Shia and Sunni Muslims?

B: Yes, it is correct. There is some resistance to this. Some people don’t want to see us Sunnis and Shias together. But we think in order to have mutual understanding and not to have confrontations, we should be together, and thus, of course with the help of the government, we will avoid conflicts.

A: Could you tell me what are the problems that Muslim community encounters in nowadays Georgia?

B: Two months ago I was in Istanbul. There was this conference that included minorities (most probably religious one –AC) from 103 countries. I was representing Georgia. What we have in Georgia today…Of course there is no country in the world which would not have problems, but today I think, in spite of having some small problems, we live well and peacefully. We have more tolerance and mutual love and respect than in other countries. I listened to some country representatives, which said that they are afraid of letting their 8 years old children play in the streets. If we look at Rakhine state in Myanmar… But thanks God that we don’t have this…Maybe because we are Georgians and can better understand one another.

Of course there are radical groups in both Orthodox Christian community and in Muslim community too. But we, their leaders, will try our best to have peace in the country; to have love in the country…This is how the country of David the Builder should be like. I hope that with mutual love we will build better Georgia.

A: What are the activities in which Samufto is engaged in at the moment? What do you or your colleagues usually do?

B: First of all, we had this problem of not having literature about Islam in Georgian language. Thus, the society did not know about Islam…They considered Islam to be violent religion…You know that nowadays when someone says Islam, they link terrorism to it right away. Islam is an Arabic word, which derives from seleme, which means peace. Islam is the religion of peace. Many people in Russia and in Europe convert to Islam nowadays. Many educated people accept this religion so in order for it not to develop and not to thrive, there are some actions taken to contest this religion. Thanks God that Georgia is aside from all this.
We want to give to our (Muslim – AC) community the literature, which will show them true Islam. […]

Quran was translated from French to Georgian language in 1906. This was initiative of Ilia Chavchavadze who did the great thing for Georgian Muslims, as he understood that they need Georgian literature, religious books in Georgian. […]

We as _Samufto_ do our best to make sure that there is no hatred of other religions; we educate Georgian Muslims. We put the emphasis on the education. […]

In the past we had this problem… The elderly generation of Georgian Muslims could not say that they were Georgians. This was the fault of the Ottoman Empire…They put this idea in them (in Georgian Muslims – AC) that being Georgian meant that one was also Christian. So if someone would say that he/she was Georgian it would mean that the person is not Muslim.

**A: This was during the Ottoman rule?**

**B:** Yes, this was a significant problem. They (the Ottomans – AC) influenced people in such a way, that you could not tell the grandfathers that they were Georgians because being Georgian meant being non-Muslim. […]

But now we have tried to overcome this problem. We do our best to let people know that we are Georgians and that we are Georgian Muslims. Islam is not the religion of Turkish people. It is the religion of the world. […] Georgian nation was there even before Christianity. […]

**A: Do you think that there is negative attitude towards Muslims in Georgia?**

**B:** Yes, there was some negativity in the past. But many things have changed. We meet with the leader of Georgian Orthodox Church, with Armenian Church, with Catholics. During these meetings, we discuss issues and try to reach compromise. […]

**A: In some of the books that I have read, the scholars are noting, that in the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, there was a process of Christianization in Ajara region. How could you explain this?**

**B:** Because of the lack of religious literature in Georgian language…there were some attempts to convince people to accept Christianity… This lack of the literature led to this conversions and process of Christianization.

Also, there was this narrative of if you are not Christian, then you are not Georgian. Part of the population, who knew neither about Islam, nor about Christianity…because all the religions were persecuted during the Soviet era… they converted.

This idea that if you are not Orthodox Christian then you are not Georgian, it’s wrong. We in Ajara think that we are even more Georgians… In some places in Upper Ajara you can find all Georgian expressions. […]

I have some friends who converted to Christianity from Islam. If I ask them tell me what are 10 commandments, they will not be able to name even one. […]

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Some people think that they will loose Georgianness if they are not Christians. If you are not Christian, then you are Tatar. In the past, when someone would refer to Georgian Muslims, they would name them as Tatars, which means that they (Georgian Muslims – AC) were not considered Georgians and it was assumed that they don’t love their country. We consider ourselves to be true Georgians! In the war of 2008 I lost two cousins. They were defending their country; defending both the Christians and the Muslims. […]

There is no ethnicity in the religion. Quran says that no one of us is better then the other. […]

A: This would be my last question to you: do you think there is anything about interreligious dialogue in Georgia, which European states could use? Or we are the ones who should look at European example?

B: I think it is both. But I will tell you one thing. We frequently have NGO representatives from Europe who speak with us about freedom, religious freedom, and human rights. However, I would say that there are many things that Europe should learn from us! Maybe we are not as developed economically as Europe is, but we are descendants of such people! We are descendants of Georgian nation, of David the Builder, who lived in mutual love with the others. […]

I even told this to Europeans: “When you speak about the human rights here, first take care of what you have in Europe!” As you know they draw a caricature of the Prophet in France. Religious freedom does not let you to humiliate the things that I consider sacred. […]

Those problems that Europe is facing, they are not present in Georgia. For example, there was a problem of letting girl with headscarves to go to schools […] but let me give you an example of my daughter who just graduated from the 12ve grade. She has been going to school with headscarf for couple of years and she has never had such a problem.

A: Your daughter was studying in Batumi or Tbilisi?

B: In Batumi.

A: There were no negative comments…

B: No. In Batumi and Tbilisi universities we have girls with headscarves […] and they don’t have any problems. There was an issue in one district where the head of the school did not let the girl to attend the classes because of her wearing headscarf, but the government intervened and everything was solved immediately. […] The tolerance that we have in the country is something that others should look at and should have as an example. […]