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# Islam and Religious Transformation in Adjara

Thomas Liles

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# Islam and Religious Transformation in Adjara

*The Autonomous Republic of Adjara, located in the southwest corner of Georgia along the Turkish border, has been the scene of a peculiar religious transformation in the last two decades. Specifically, large segments of Adjara's traditionally Muslim population have undergone a relatively quick rate of conversion to Christianity. Whereas the region's population was predominantly Muslim at the time of the Soviet Union's collapse, or at least nominally so after seven decades of official Soviet atheism, more recent figures indicate that Adjara's confessional makeup is approximately 65% Christian and 30% Muslim. Unlike Georgia's other Muslim groups in the Kvemo Kartli region and Pankisi, where Muslims are ethnic Azeris and Kists, respectively, Adjara's Muslims are ethnically Georgian.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

While Adjara's Islamic identity has been in decline, the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) has increased its presence in Adjara's capital Batumi and western lowlands since the 1990s. Today Islam retains a strong presence primarily in the republic's eastern highlands (upper Adjara), specifically in the Khulo district and to a lesser extent in the more rural areas of the Shuakhevi and Keda districts. With financial support from the state, the GOC maintains a growing presence in upper Adjara, and conversions to Christianity in the area are becoming more common. Simultaneously, certain segments of the region's Muslim population express dissatisfaction with perceived state discrimination, mainly resulting from the lack of state funding for local Islamic institutions and the difficulties of legally registering such institutions. With the creation of the new Administration of Georgian Muslims (AGM) in May 2011 and the passage of a new law on the registration of minority religious groups in July 2011, this discontent may well subside. However, it is still too early to tell whether these laws will have a significant effect in upper Adjara.

The purpose of this working paper is to provide an assessment of the current religious situation in upper Adjara. The paper will be organized around three themes. Firstly, the current situation will be contextualized through an analysis of the structural factors which have given impetus to religious transformation and conversion to Christianity. The intersection between Christianity, Georgian nationalism, and social mobility is particularly salient

in this regard. On the one hand, the modern conception of Georgian national identity since the fall of the Soviet Union has come to be associated almost exclusively with Christianity. Simultaneously, young Adjarans' access to education and economic opportunities often entails relocation to cities and regions where Christianity is the dominant religion. As discussed below, many people in Adjara – particularly younger people – are reconfiguring their religious identities in light of these structural developments, largely in order to be perceived as more legitimate members of the Georgian nation.

Secondly, the paper will address the effects of local institutions on the religious situation in upper Adjara. These institutions fall into three categories: 1) the GOC and GOC-administered education institutions; 2) public secondary schools; and 3) local mosques, Islamic religious schools, or madrassahs, and independent Islamic organizations. Though the degree of active Christian proselytizing seems to be quite limited, the GOC continues to extend its presence in upper Adjara in the form of new churches, religious schools, and universities. Simultaneously, public secondary schools, though officially neutral in religious matters, demonstrate somewhat of a bias toward orthodoxy in the instruction of history.<sup>1</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, the number of mosques, madrassahs, and Muslim organizations has increased

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<sup>1</sup> That is, the Christian history of Georgia is covered extensively, as is certainly necessary given the country's historical association with orthodoxy. The main issue is that Adjara's Islamic history receives essentially no attention.



in upper Adjara since the fall of the USSR, particularly in rural villages where Islam has a wider support base. Thus varying institutions, whether explicitly or implicitly, have some role in shaping local conceptions of religion.

Finally, the working paper will analyze current Muslim issues as well as state policy on religious affairs in upper Adjara. While inter-religious relations in Adjara are quite good, many Muslim leaders and residents express frustration with perceived state discrimination. Namely, they argue that the state's support for the GOC and the dominant orthodox-centric nationalist discourse has created an exclusionary social environment in which Georgian Muslims are considered by many as illegitimate stakeholders in the Georgian nation. Furthermore, many Muslim leaders lament the state's lack of concern for the effective operation of Muslim institutions, both in terms of lacking financial support and a 2010 incident involving the seizure of property from a Muslim charity in the Khulo district.<sup>2</sup>

In its attempt to accelerate Georgia's integration into the Euro-Atlantic community, however, the Georgian government has recently made a number of policy decisions regarding religious minority rights, decisions which are aimed at facilitating civic integration in the country.<sup>3</sup> These policies will likewise be analyzed, along with their perceptions in Adjara and their tangible effects to date. The working paper will conclude by offering a brief set of recommendations to the Georgian government as to how religious affairs might be handled in upper Adjara so as to ensure the formulation of inclusive religious policies.

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<sup>2</sup> The incident occurred at several religious schools administered by the Muslim charity Madli-2005 in the Khulo district. The goal of the institution is to provide free room, board, and religious education to poor Muslim youth in Adjara. The reasons for government intervention were related to taxes and registration, though since 2010 the problem has more or less been resolved.

<sup>3</sup> The government's work in this arena includes the May 2011 creation of the Administration of Georgian Muslims (AGM), which – though not officially a state entity – was established with government support. Additionally, the government helped pass a new law on the registration of minority religious groups in July 2011, which allows non-orthodox religious groups “with historic ties to Georgia” to register as legal entities of public law. The AGM is one of several minority religious groups already registered under the law.

## II. METHODOLOGY

Once Research for this working paper was conducted from September to December 2011. Numerous secondary sources – including academic publications as well as government and NGO reports – were consulted for those sections of the paper dealing primarily with history and background information. Likewise, extensive fieldwork was carried out in Adjara during the course of two research trips (7 October – 4 November and 4 – 13 December 2011), primarily in the Khulo and Shuakhevi districts and the regional capital Batumi.

Above all, qualitative methods (i.e. structured and non-structured interviews, focus groups) were employed during these fieldwork trips. Interviews were conducted with prominent Muslim religious leaders, including Adjara's regional mufti and the muftis of the Shuakhevi and Khulo districts. Additionally, a focus group comprised of the Khulo district's imams was conducted in the district muftiate in the administrative centre of Khulo. Research included trips to Islamic institutions throughout Adjara, including the Batumi mosque and mosques in the villages of Khulo-Centre, Duadzeebi, Didadjara, and Riketi, as well as two madrassahs in Khulo-Centre.

To find out how religion was taught in public schools, interviews and focus groups were conducted with teachers in secondary schools in Khulo-Centre, Didadjara, and Riketi. A number of orthodox institutions were also visited during the course of research, including the Khulo Church of Annunciation of the Virgin Mary, the GOC-administered secondary school in Khulo-Centre, and the GOC-administered Tbel Abuseridze State University in Khichauri (Shuakhevi district). At these institutions, interviews were conducted with priests, teachers, and professors. Several university students were also consulted during the trip to Tbel Abuseridze University.

Finally, a number of government officials and religion experts in both Batumi and Tbilisi were interviewed. These interviewees had first hand knowledge of the religious situation in Adjara and were thus not only able to substantiate the findings of ECMI's fieldwork in the region, but also contribute to a better understanding of the overall situation.



### III. BACKGROUND

As a border region under the suzerainty of various empires, both Adjara and Georgia as a whole have a long and complex history with different religious traditions. Under the dominance of the Roman empire during the third and fourth centuries, Christianity is said to have spread to Georgia through the missionary work of the apostles St. Andrew and Simon the Zealot as well as through the work of St. Nino beginning in 328 AD. The religion's adoption fortified the Georgian monarchy's alliance with Rome, while also destroying the power of Georgia's influential and wealthy pagan priesthood. Bishoprics were subsequently established in those towns which hosted a provincial government; by the middle of the fifth century, thirty bishoprics had been established.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, Georgia remained politically decentralized for several more centuries. Regional noblemen often spoiled attempts at political centralization<sup>5</sup>, and the shifting hegemony of the Byzantine and Sassanid (Persian) empires in the region made Georgian unification a chimera.<sup>6</sup>

Shifting imperial hegemony would continue in Georgia for several centuries, with Byzantium and Arab conquerors vying for control of much of the South Caucasus. The centralization of the Georgian state in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries signaled its development as a regional power, as well as a concomitant entrenchment of Christianity and the proliferation of Christian culture in Georgia.<sup>7</sup> Yet, the fall of the Byzantine Empire – Georgia's most prominent Christian ally at the time – to the invading Ottoman Turks in 1453 signaled an end to Georgia's regional influence. The Ottomans soon embarked on military forays into southwestern Georgia, ultimately

<sup>4</sup> Ronald G. Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington (1994), p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> The smaller medieval kingdoms located in what is now present-day Georgia dealt with foreign suzerainty in a number of ways, often with a religious component. The Kingdom of Lazica, which was comprised largely of what is now western Georgia, abandoned Christianity from the mid-fifth century to the earlier sixth century after coming under the hegemony of Persia, at that time dominated by the Zoroastrian Sassanids. In 522, Lazian kings turned to Byzantium for aid, cementing the new alliance with renewed observance of Christianity. The Kingdom of Iberia in present-day southeastern Georgia remained Christian even under Sassanid rule, though Iberian kings likewise used Christianity to obtain support from Byzantium. David Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity*, Oxford University Press (1994), p. 282.

<sup>7</sup> Suny, *op cit*, Ref 5, p. 38.

annexing the regions of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Adjara in the seventeenth century.<sup>8</sup>

Under Ottoman control, Adjara underwent a widespread religious transformation from orthodox Christianity to Islam. Though there is a lack of records from this period, it is generally thought that the conversion process occurred at different rates according to socioeconomic status. Most Adjaran noblemen are believed to have accepted Islam relatively soon after the Ottoman annexation, as conversion to the empire's hegemonic religion guaranteed some degree of political and economic continuity through the preservation of existing local power structures. Additionally, there were tax incentives for converting, since the Ottoman millet system entailed a lower tax rate for Muslim segments of the empire's population.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, large swathes of Adjara's peasant population likely remained Christian for significantly longer, converting to Islam after several generations. There was no tangible incentive for peasants to convert, at least initially, and at any rate the Ottomans' cultural and administrative presence in Adjara was comparatively weak for most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, Islam had penetrated the majority of Adjara's population by the beginning of the nineteenth century – approximately the same time that Ottoman rulers began to treat the region as a strategic asset. The Russian Empire's expansion into the Caucasus in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the Russo-Ottoman Wars of 1828-29 prompted Istanbul to increase its authority in Adjara. Adjara's elite, bolstered by links to authorities in Istanbul, exhibited opposition to Russian expansion in the region and rejected Russian calls to switch allegiance. Relations between Muslim Adjarans and Christian Georgians in the surrounding regions also deteriorated, as the two sides carried out raids and military forays into each other's territory. Secondary sources suggest that there was a concomitant rise in Islamic identity among Adjara's elite at this time.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Nugzar Mgeladze and Kevin Tuite, "Ajarians," in *Encyclopedia of World Cultures* (1996), <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3458000949.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Ruslan Baramidze, *The Georgian Muslims in the Context of Modernity*, Niko Berdzenishvili Institute, Batumi (2010), p. 525.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with religion expert Levan Abashidze, 29 November 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Mathijs Pelkmans, "Religion, Nation and State in Georgia: Christian Expansion in Muslim Ajara," in *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2002), p. 254.



Following Turkey's defeat in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, Adjara was ceded to the Russian Empire. The idea of potentially losing special privileges under Russian suzerainty – combined with Istanbul's financially attractive resettlement offers for Adjarans – prompted much of Adjara's elite to emigrate from the region to Turkey.<sup>12</sup> Simultaneously, Russian authorities attempted to partially alter the demographic character of Adjara by stimulating Christian migration to the region. By and large, though, Russian rule did not entail strong attempts to change the fundamental nature of most Adjarans' religious beliefs.<sup>13</sup> Russian authorities officially demonstrated tolerance toward Muslims, and the Ottoman tax system remained in place.<sup>14</sup> The most tangible transformation, perhaps, was that of the remaining Adjaran elites who retained their traditional Islamic beliefs, adapted to the new imperial Russian administration, and in many cases cultivated a sense of Georgian nationalism.<sup>15</sup>

The rise of the Bolsheviks and the incorporation of Georgia into the Soviet Union in 1921 proved considerably more consequential for Adjara's religious situation. Certainly, Soviet ethno-territorial delimitations would have suggested a possible preservation of Muslim identity in Adjara, as the republic was granted Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) status (within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic) based entirely on its Sunni Islamic demographic makeup.<sup>16</sup> In practice, however, a

combination of imposed isolation, anti-Islamic tendencies among local cadres, and Soviet ethnic nationality policy put Islam in Adjara in a precarious situation. The closure of the Turkish border and the imposition of strict internal travel regulations, for example, led to significant isolation among upper Adjara's Muslim population.<sup>17</sup>

Concomitantly, Soviet atheist policy and the orientation of regional and local power structures had consequences for Islam. Though mosques and spiritual boards continued to function throughout the 1920s, the intense political centralization in the 1930s that came as a result of Stalin's consolidation entailed the complete dismantling of Adjara's Muslim spiritual boards and the closure of mosques and other religious institutions.<sup>18</sup> Local authorities were of a decidedly more anti-Islamic orientation as well, in many cases transforming mosques into storage sheds.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Soviet nationality policy led to the construction and entrenchment of a Georgian national identity<sup>20</sup> which, while not explicitly pro-orthodox, conveyed an implicit historical association with orthodoxy and thus created an environment in which the GOC would eventually surge.<sup>21</sup>

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autonomous status was an exception, borne out of the 1921 Treaty of Kars between the Soviet Union and Turkey. Article VI of the treaty stipulated that Adjara be given autonomous status and that "each community is guaranteed its cultural and religious rights," no doubt a reference to Islam.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Levan Abashidze, 29 November 2011. Traveling within Adjara (Batumi excluded) was extremely difficult for Georgians and Adjarans alike. Reaching Khulo, for example, entailed crossing two internal borders.

<sup>18</sup> Ruslan Baramidze, "Ethnic Georgian Muslims: A Comparison of Highland and Lowland Villages," in *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 20, ed. Thomas Bremer, 11 October 2010, p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> The mosque in Khulo was used as a storage facility for chemicals and farm equipment, while the area immediately surrounding the mosque was used for the cultivation of crops. According to mufti Aslan Abashidze, a series of Muslim graves beside the mosque were ravaged and the corpses removed.

<sup>20</sup> For an in-depth explanation of Soviet nationalities policy, see Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," in *Becoming National*, Geoff Eley and Ronald G. Suny, eds., Oxford University Press (1996), pp. 203-238.

<sup>21</sup> See Mathijs Pelkmans, *Defending the Border: Identity, Religion, and Modernity in the Republic of Georgia*, Cornell University Press (2006).

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 255-56.

<sup>13</sup> George Sanikidze and Edward W. Walker, "Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia," BPS Working Paper Series, University of California, Berkeley (2004), p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Tsarist authorities' tolerance toward Islam did not have an entirely altruistic basis, but was rather a pragmatic policy aimed at gradually extending control over religious activities in the region. Simultaneously, possibilities for Islamic education abroad were curtailed, and imperial authorities issued a spate of regulations related to Muslim weddings, funerals, and religious holidays. Baramidze, *op cit*, Ref 10, p. 526.

<sup>15</sup> The relatives of former Adjaran strongman Aslan Abashidze represent a case in point. Abashidze hails from a prominent upper Adjaran Muslim clan which has yielded a number of prominent regional leaders. Abashidze's grandfather, Mehmed Pacha Abashidze, was an observant Muslim and a prominent figure in Georgia's national liberation movement following World War I. International Crisis Group, "Saakashvili's Ajara Success: Repeatable Elsewhere in Georgia?", ICG Europe Briefing, Tbilisi/Brussels, 18 August 2004, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> ASSR status was almost always reserved for regions with an ethnic makeup different from that of the titular nationality of the corresponding union republic. Adjara's



#### IV. THE ORTHODOXY-NATIONALISM NEXUS AND IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION IN ADJARA

The religious transformation currently taking place in upper Adjara can, in large part, be traced to a number of structural developments that arose during the waning days of Soviet central power. Namely, the introduction of perestroika and glasnost and the subsequent onset of Georgia's independence movement engendered a potent brand of Georgian ethnonationalism in which orthodoxy played an explicit symbolic role. The GOC was also able to consolidate its position as an independent power base, advancing its mission with little state oversight and eventually serving as a de facto state consultative body and powerful lobby group. Thus the centrality of orthodoxy for post-Soviet Georgian national identity, combined with upper Adjarans' increased levels of social mobility to other predominantly Christian cities and regions within Georgia, have had clear effects on many Adjarans' religious identity.

Key to the fusion between orthodoxy and Georgian nationalism was the era of 're-nationalization'<sup>22</sup> ushered in by the decline of the Soviet Union, during which an intense nationalist discourse arose in many of the ethnically non-Russian Soviet successor states. Practitioners of this discourse – nationalist dissidents such as Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Merab Kostava in Georgia's case – advanced the primacy of a titular nation and its perceived weakness, as well as this nation's inherent right to control state mechanisms. Simultaneously, national elites used state action as a means of strengthening the position of the titular nation. Georgia's post-Soviet political trajectory followed this trend quite closely, as the country's 1991 independence saw Gamsakhurdia's accession to the presidency and subsequent attempts to reassert state control over the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, with disastrous results.<sup>23</sup>

Crucially, the 're-nationalization' discourse in Georgia drew heavily on the country's orthodox traditions. As Zubrzycki notes in his analysis of

religion in post-Soviet Poland,<sup>24</sup> and which is equally applicable in Georgia's case, the symbolic elements of the de facto established religion were effectively 're-sacralized.' In Georgia, this was partly accomplished through the introduction of the history of Christianity into the public school curriculum in the late 1980s.<sup>25</sup> Zviad Gamsakhurdia's 1988 founding of the political-religious Society of Saint Ilia the Righteous<sup>26</sup> as well as the baptism of Eduard Shevardnadze in 1992<sup>27</sup> also indicate a greater symbolic role for orthodoxy. Generally, the majority of Georgian politicians during and after the collapse of the USSR strove to express their loyalty to the church.<sup>28</sup>

The church's consolidation as an independent power base ensured that orthodoxy would not be confined to an exclusively symbolic role in Georgia's wider national consciousness. Already in Soviet times, the GOC was the only institution in Georgia formally independent of the rigid hierarchy of the Soviet system, and the accession of Ilia II to the Patriarchate of the GOC in 1978 saw an increase in the organization's activities.<sup>29</sup> Following independence, a series of legislative actions and informal deals with the government greatly enhanced the GOC's real influence. Georgia's 1995 constitution, while guaranteeing freedom of religion, recognized the "special role of the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia in the history of Georgia and its independence from the state."<sup>30</sup> The state reached a

<sup>24</sup> Geneviève Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland*, University of Chicago Press (2006).

<sup>25</sup> Simon Papuashvili, "Religious freedom report," Human Rights Centre (HRIDC), 25 April 2008, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who served as Georgia's president from 1991 until his violent overthrow in 1992, displayed a particularly ardent vision of Christianity's role in Georgian national identity. He appointed orthodox priests to powerful positions in many of Georgia's Muslim populated areas, and his most famous work, *Sakartvelos sulieri missia* (Georgia's Spiritual Mission), "depicts Georgian christianity as a militant ideology in defense of the nation...as a source of Georgia's 'special spiritual purpose'..." Stephen F. Jones, "Georgia: the trauma of statehood," in *New States, New Politics: Building the Post-Soviet Nations*, Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras, eds., Cambridge University Press (1997), p. 521.

<sup>27</sup> Lodi News-Sentinel, "Shevardnadze baptized a Christian," 27 February 1993, p. 18.

<sup>28</sup> Levan Abashidze, "Das Recht der Religionsgemeinschaften in Georgien," in *Das Recht der Religionsgemeinschaften in Mittel-, Ost- und Südeuropa*, Wolfgang Lienemann and Hans-Richard Reuter, eds., Baden-Baden: Nomos (2005), p. 200.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Georgia, Article IX.

<sup>22</sup> See Rogers Brubaker, "Nationalizing States Revisited: Projects and Processes of Nationalization in Post-Soviet States," in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34 (2011): 1785-1814.

<sup>23</sup> See Christoph Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus*, New York University Press (2007), pp. 115-151.



separate Constitutional Agreement (Concordat) with the GOC in 2002, which exempts the church from certain taxes and its clergy from military conscription, while also compensating the church for property losses incurred under Soviet Rule. Additionally, the Concordat allows the GOC to collaborate with the state regarding the content of the public school curriculum, thus essentially giving the church the position of a state consultative body.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, a number of secondary schools were placed under the jurisdiction of the GOC during the 1990s.<sup>32</sup>

In certain cases, the GOC has been able to act as a veritable lobby group with the power to mobilize large numbers of its supporters. A notable 2002 case, not long after the passage of the Concordat, saw the church prevent the signing of an agreement between then President Shevardnadze and the Catholic Church on the grounds that the agreement lacked transparency and would infringe on the GOC's influence.<sup>33</sup> Recently, the GOC organized mass demonstrations in July 2011 in opposition to the passage of a legislative amendment allowing for the registration of minority religious groups as entities of public law, a technically higher legal status than previously afforded to religious minority groups. The Holy Synod, the GOC's main decision-making body, issued a statement accusing the government for failing to consult with the church prior to the amendment's passage.<sup>34</sup>

There exists an extra-constitutional state-church relationship which has also been significant in terms of the GOC's practical influence. In particular, state funding for the church – though technically barred by Article IX of the Georgian constitution – has reached significant levels in recent years. This funding tripled to approximately \$15 million in 2009 (with the GOC-administered Tbel Abuseridze State University in Adjara receiving \$1.9 million), and in the same year the government gave 10 luxury cars to church officials as a sign of goodwill.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the state provided

around \$15 million to the GOC in 2010 and \$13.6 million in 2011, with 2012 projections also hovering at \$13.6 million.<sup>36</sup> The unofficial relationship provides some benefits to the state. Considering the GOC's moral authority, positive relations with the church confer a higher degree of legitimacy on the state (Georgia's opposition parties likewise court the church<sup>37</sup>). Given the GOC's ability to mobilize supporters in opposition to government policies, however, this informal relationship can also be a double-edged sword for the state.

Thus the orthodoxy-nationalism nexus and the expansion of the GOC was one of the most consequential developments with regards to religious identity in Georgia. The new nationalist discourse represented a paradigm shift, so to speak, in what it meant to be Georgian. In other words, being Georgian became increasingly synonymous with subscribing to Georgian orthodoxy. While this trend may not have posed any problems to the vast majority of Georgia's population – which was and remains orthodox – the new national identity paradigm presented much of Adjara's ethnic Georgian Muslim population with a religious identity issue.

In light of Georgia's post-Soviet nationalist trajectory, some residents in upper Adjara began to reconfigure their religious orientation in accordance with the new "expectations" associated with national identity. While initially confined to the lowlands, the number of conversions has spread to upper Adjara in recent years, particularly in the Keda and Shuakhevi districts and to a lesser extent in the Khulo district. While this report does not seek to put the genuineness of any individual's or group's religious convictions in question, it does seek to underline certain correlations associated with religious transformation. Namely, it posits: 1) that religious transformation is most prominent among upper Adjara's middle class as well as the younger, more socially mobile segments of the region's population; 2) that geography is inherent to the transformation process, as Christianity has made inroads in the accessible administrative centres of upper Adjara, while Islam remains dominant in the region's isolated villages; and 3) that Adjara's cultural

<sup>31</sup> Bert Middel, "State and Religion in the Black Sea Region," NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 25 May 2008, <http://www.nato-pa.int/Default.asp?SHORTCUT=1164>.

<sup>32</sup> Abashidze, op cit, Ref 25, p. 201. Accordingly, teachers at these institutions pay special attentions to subjects such as 'Religion' and 'Religious Upbringing.'

<sup>33</sup> Giorgi Sepashvili, "Brethren in Christ, Divided," Civil Georgia, 29 September 2003, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=5019>.

<sup>34</sup> "Georgian Orthodox Church softens stance," Civil Georgia, 11 July 2011, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=5019>.

<sup>35</sup> Molly Corso, "Georgia: Church-State Separation Becomes an Issue amid Government Financial Support for Georgian Orthodox Church," EurasiaNet, 7 April 2009,

<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav040609b.shtml>.

<sup>36</sup> "State Budget Assigned sums for Spending Organizations," Parliamentary Budget Office of Georgia, [http://www.pbo.parliament.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=59](http://www.pbo.parliament.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=59).

<sup>37</sup> "Opposition parties condemn religious groups' legal status law," Civil Georgia, 6 July 2011, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23708>.



and ethnic association with Georgia has facilitated the conversion process and, in many cases, led to the primacy of national identity over religious identity even among many of the region's Muslims.

Among upper Adjara's middle class population, which consists largely of teachers, doctors, and local cadres, certain trends toward religious transformation have surfaced in the last two decades. Full conversion to Christianity is not uncommon for those segments of middle class society coming of age around the period of Georgia's nationalist mobilization in the early 1990s. Even older middle class residents in upper Adjara have partially followed suit; though they seldom convert to Christianity, their Muslim identity tends to be relatively weak and levels of personal religiosity remain low, and they often have Christian children and/or grandchildren.

Middle class conversions to Christianity and weak Muslim identity can be traced largely to the seven decades of state-supported atheism under the Soviet Union. There was a conspicuous lack of religious activity in public life during the Soviet years, and religion was not a high priority even in middle class private life in upper Adjara. Interviews with teachers in Khulo-Centre, for example, indicate a lack of Muslim upbringing among the middle class at that time. As one Christian teacher stated, "It's not as if I was ever truly Muslim. I never read the Koran or knew the tenets of Islam, and I didn't even know how to pray."<sup>38</sup> Such conversions often took place around 1991,<sup>39</sup> thus suggesting that the intersection between weak Muslim upbringing and the onset of Georgia's period of nationalist mobilization facilitated the conversion process.

For the most part, Muslim identity has never been particularly strong even among older members of middle class society in upper Adjara.<sup>40</sup> While many older doctors and teachers recognize Islam as their traditional confession, their observance of the religion in everyday life is usually low and confined to major

religious holidays such as Kurban-Bayram. In fact, when discussing personal religious matters with older middle class Adjarans one is unlikely to hear specific references to Islam. Rather, the phrase "there is only one god, and that's what is most important" is quite common, thus reflecting a genuine religious conviction without religious dogmatism.<sup>41</sup> This segment of upper Adjara's population tends to place national identity above Islam and in many cases does not view the spread of orthodoxy in a negative light.<sup>42</sup>

Religious transformation has shown similar patterns among the younger sections of upper Adjara's population, though with considerably higher rates of conversion to Christianity. Key to the youth conversion process is the intersection between social mobility and the orthodoxy-associated brand of national identity so prominent throughout the rest of Georgia. Specifically, young Muslims in upper Adjara can usually retain their religious beliefs as long as they remain in their local surroundings. However, if they move to Batumi or another region of Georgia to seek out higher education and employment opportunities, there is usually pressure to reconfigure their religious beliefs so as to avoid social exclusion.<sup>43</sup>

The economic situation in upper Adjara is a major push factor for young Adjarans to move to other parts of Georgia, thus also constituting an indirect catalyst for conversions. The region's economy is largely based on agriculture, with major activities including animal husbandry and the cultivation of potatoes, beans, corn, and tobacco.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, any industrial base the region had during the Soviet period has largely disappeared. The administrative centres of Khulo and

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<sup>41</sup> Interviews in Didadjara (9 December 2011) and Riketi (12 December 2011).

<sup>42</sup> An older Muslim teacher in Riketi's secondary school expressed positive opinions about the construction of churches in the Khulo district, describing the region's religious transformations as Adjara's 'return' to Georgia proper.

<sup>43</sup> One anecdote cited by the district head of Khulo's Muslim boarding schools is especially indicative of youth conversions and Muslim leaders' perceptions of this trend: "Young people don't know why they change their religion. Once I met a student who converted from Islam to Christianity. I asked him the reason for his decision and he said his friends were Christians. Then I asked him why he bothered to convert in the first place if he never intended to go to church or lead a Christian life, and he didn't have an answer for that. In my opinion he did it to appear better in his friends' view, and many young people make similar mistakes. They change their beliefs for the sake of others." Interview at Khulo muftiate, 28 October 2011.

<sup>44</sup> Interview at Khulo secondary school, 26 October 2011.

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<sup>38</sup> Other teachers corroborated this statement, saying that parents often failed to teach their children about Islam under Soviet rule. Interview at Khulo secondary school, 26 October 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Interviews at Khulo secondary school, 26 and 27 October 2011.

<sup>40</sup> Conversely, those older segments of upper Adjara's population which do not hail from the middle class tend to exhibit higher rates of religiosity. When discussing Adjara's religious matters with younger people and Christians in upper Adjara, many expressed that only old people go to the mosques and practice Islam on a regular basis. Of course, the category 'old people' fails to take class differences into account, but the sentiment is nevertheless revealing.



Shuakhevi once hosted textile and juice factories, respectively, both of which were closed following independence.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, higher education in upper Adjara is not an option except for the GOC-administered Tbel Absuseridze State University in the Shuakhevi district. Thus local wages remain low, poverty is common, and opportunities for social mobility strictly within upper Ajara are limited. As a result, the majority of young Adjarans opt for education and work opportunities elsewhere in Georgia.<sup>46</sup>

In certain instances, young Adjarans return to their villages following the completion of higher education.<sup>47</sup> Yet, in those cases where Adjarans remain in the cities, they usually convert to Christianity or simply lose their Muslim identity. This trend was mentioned in almost every interview and focus group during fieldwork trips to upper Adjara from October-December 2011. As Khulo's mufti Aslan Abashidze described, "There is little land here and when two or three siblings live in the same house, economic problems often arise. They get tired of rural life, move to the city, and see how other Georgians lead their [religious] lives. Many subsequently choose Christian beliefs in order to fit in with their friends and neighbors in the cities."<sup>48</sup>

Accordingly, there is an inherent geographical component to the religious transformation process in upper Adjara. Christianity's dominance in Batumi and in other regions of Georgia is an obvious geographical element of the conversion process, especially when viewed in light of younger Adjarans' migratory patterns to the cities. Concomitantly, geographical considerations within Adjara are also important in relation to religious transformation, as the preponderance toward conversion tends to break down along a number of relatively clear boundaries in the region.

In general, the expansion of Christianity in upper Adjara can be linked to district administrative centres as well as a particular settlement's position along major thoroughfares and historic trade routes. Indeed, many of the region's most prominent Christian sites are located along the infrastructurally sound

section of the historic Batumi-Akhaltshikhe highway, with the GOC-administered Tbel Abuseridze State University in Khichauri and a new orthodox church in Khulo-Centre counting among the most dominant Christian places.<sup>49</sup> One Adjaran government official also cited Skhalta – the home of medieval humanist Tbel Abuseridze and the current seat of the Skhalta eparchy – as a settlement along an ancient trade route with historically higher observance of Christianity and comparatively lower observance of Islam.<sup>50</sup>

Conversely, any excursion into the villages off the main Batumi-Akhaltshikhe highway or east of Khulo-Centre<sup>51</sup> illustrates a religious landscape still dominated by upper Adjara's Muslim traditions. In such isolated and less developed settlements, traditional family structures and lifestyles have largely remained intact, and there is almost no sign of shifting religious identities. Accordingly, essentially no Muslim families in locations such as Didadjara, Duadzeebi, Uchkho, Gurta, or Riketi have opted to convert. Ghorjomi, an isolated community located a considerable distance from the main road, is especially renowned for its adherence to Islamic traditions and its proliferation of mosques and madrassahs.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, Islamic charitable traditions such as *vazife*, *oshori*, and *zekat* are still widely practiced throughout rural Khulo.<sup>53</sup> Thus even if social mobility among young upper Adjarans often entails conversion to Christianity, Islam remains the dominant religion within the rural communities of the region.

<sup>45</sup> Interviews at Shuakhevi (7 December 2011) and Khulo (10 December 2011).

<sup>46</sup> Out of a recent graduating class of 20 from Didadjara's secondary school, 13 went to university in other Georgian cities. Interviews at Khulo secondary school (27 October 2011) and Didadjara secondary school (9 December 2011).

<sup>47</sup> Interviews at Didadjara secondary school (9 December 2011) and Riketi secondary school (12 December 2011).

<sup>48</sup> Imam focus group at Khulo muftiate, 1 November 2011.

<sup>49</sup> It bears mentioning that the administrative centre of Shuakhevi, which is located on the Batumi-Akhaltshikhe highway, has no mosques. The settlement's cultural centre doubles as an orthodox church on Sundays. Interview at Shuakhevi cultural centre, 7 December 2011.

<sup>50</sup> Interview at Adjaran Parliament, Batumi, 5 December 2011.

<sup>51</sup> Village roads are almost always unpaved and difficult to navigate. The Batumi-Akhaltshikhe road – almost all of which is paved between Batumi and Khulo-Centre – turns into little more than a potholed dirt track immediately east of Khulo-Centre. Additionally, avalanches are a serious travel hazard in the region, and it is not uncommon for boulders to fall onto the main road. Sheer isolation and navigability problems have arguably contributed to the preservation of Islam in so much of the Khulo district.

<sup>52</sup> Baramidze, *op cit*, Ref 19, pp. 13-15.

<sup>53</sup> These traditions entail the collection of food and donations from residents, the donation of a percentage of personally grown natural products to financially troubled families, and the donation of money by richer residents to those in need, respectively. Interview with mufti Aslan Abashidze in Khulo, 8 December 2011.



Finally, religious transformation in upper Adjara is significantly influenced by the fact that the region is – ethnically and culturally speaking – undoubtedly Georgian. Unlike Azeris in Kvemo Kartli and Kists in Pankisi, who have clear ethnic and cultural cleavages opposite the titular Georgian nation and thus have a distinct cultural basis for the preservation of their Islamic traditions, Adjarans are ethnically Georgian. The residents speak Georgian as a first language, and many families throughout the region retain distinct Georgian cultural customs such as the local production of wine and the traditional spirit chacha.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Georgian drinking culture is strong among much of upper Adjara’s middle class and local cadres, whose sense of Georgian national identity generally takes precedence over their Islamic beliefs.<sup>55</sup> However, it is worth noting that daily non-adherence to normative Islamic beliefs is not peculiar to the middle class.<sup>56</sup>

Identity with the Georgian nation and observance of Georgian customs do not seem to entail a contradiction for those segments of upper Adjara’s population which retain a weaker association with Islam. Even a certain feeling of solidarity with the GOC as a Georgian cultural institution is not uncommon among upper Adjara’s middle class Muslims. The majority of such Muslims are quick to underline their loyalty to the Georgian nation, and they have a genuine respect for religious choice (i.e. conversion from Islam to Christianity). Thus the primacy that national identity enjoys among many Adjaran Muslims has, at the very least, provided something of a basis for religious transformation in the direction of orthodoxy.

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<sup>54</sup> Interview in Khulo, 10 December 2011. In this case, an older Muslim in Khulo described in detail the methods he followed for brewing wine. ECMI fieldwork in Riketi also revealed that many local residents brew large amounts of chacha. On countless occasions, Muslim residents in upper Adjara were seen partaking in the type of communal drinking traditions common throughout Georgia.

<sup>55</sup> Numerous discussions with middle class residents in upper Adjara, for example, indicated an undeniably nationalist orientation in the analysis of history. Such segments of society sharply criticize the Ottoman conquest of Adjara and are quick to make reference to the amount of Georgian ‘territory’ currently under Turkish control, a clear reference to Georgian hegemony in eastern Anatolia in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

<sup>56</sup> When asked about the slaying of a wild boar in Riketi and whether eating pork posed problems for the local Muslim population, one local exclaimed, “We would be crazy not to eat the boar! Where else can we get such high quality meat?”

Nevertheless, the transformation process toward orthodoxy is not to discount other religious considerations in upper Adjara. Among the region’s Muslim leaders and the more religious segments of upper Adjaran society, leading a normative Georgian lifestyle – complete with alcohol and orthodoxy – entails an inherent contradiction with their Muslim beliefs. To be sure, these segments of the population view themselves as Georgian and are consistent in expressing support for the development of a civic nationalism whereby their loyalty to the nation will not be questioned as a result of their divergent religious beliefs. However, many Muslim leaders express frustration with the religious expectations that the dominant nationalist discourse entails.<sup>57</sup> As discussed below, there is also a movement among the more religious segments of upper Adjaran society to preserve their Islamic traditions while retaining loyalty to the Georgian nation.

## V. THE EFFECTS OF LOCAL INSTITUTIONS ON RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN UPPER ADJARA

While structural developments are an important explanatory factor for identity transformation in upper Adjara, local actors and institutions are also crucial in shaping religious identity in the region. To this end, the following three institutional categories are especially relevant: 1) the GOC and GOC-affiliated institutions; 2) public secondary schools; and 3) local mosques, madrassahs, and independent Islamic organizations. Each institution offers educational services, thus each is able to effectively convey its particular religious conception to Adjara’s population, especially to young students. Additionally, sources of funding and relations with the state differ among these institutions. The GOC – with its broad administrative and consultative prerogatives in the field of public education and significant amounts of state funding – enjoys an advantage over privately funded Islamic institutions in this regard.

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<sup>57</sup> Imam focus group at Khulo muftiate, 1 November 2011; interview with mufti Jemal Paksadze, Batumi, 13 December 2011.



### *5.1 The GOC in Upper Adjara: Church Expansion through Education*

The collapse of the Soviet Union created an environment in which religious institutions could operate with unprecedented levels of freedom. The Georgian Orthodox Church, as covered earlier in this report, benefited especially from the ‘re-nationalization’ of the Georgian state and the complementary relationship which developed between Georgian national identity and orthodoxy under the Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze regimes. Adjara, despite its autonomous status derived from the dominant religion of Sunni Islam, was no exception to this trend. With help from the authorities in Tbilisi and an initially pliable regional government in Batumi, the GOC embarked on a campaign of conversion in Adjara throughout the 1990s. This process was particularly widespread in lower Adjara, specifically in Batumi and along the coastline. Tellingly, 14 Christian churches became active in Batumi after independence, whereas the city boasts only one functioning mosque.<sup>58</sup>

The GOC extended its influence into the administrative centres of upper Adjara in the early 1990s as well, though with a weaker presence than in the lowlands. According to an orthodox priest in Khulo, the degree to which the GOC actively spreads its message in the area is limited: “It’s very hard to get locals to believe in Christianity because Turkey finances so many Islamic institutions in the area. The church is also not very active in the villages around Khulo. Sometimes we send missionaries here and there, but it’s rare.”<sup>59</sup> However, other orthodox organizations have been active in the area during the post-Soviet years. Though currently not operational, the group ‘Orthodox Parents’ Union’ was known for its aggressive propagation of orthodoxy in Adjara and other traditionally Muslim areas in Georgia, which included planting crosses near non-orthodox places of worship and releasing antagonistic statements against other confessions.<sup>60</sup>

The current lack of direct proselytizing notwithstanding, the GOC has been able to spread its message through the administration of several key education institutions and the construction of churches. In 1991, a new church was constructed in Khulo and the Gamsakhurdia government transferred jurisdiction of the town’s internat residential school to the GOC. Located beside each other in a gated off area a short distance above the town centre, the church-school combination constitutes the GOC’s primary institutional presence in the Khulo district. The school initially served as a secondary school, vocational school, and seminary, though vocational training was eventually scaled back and now the school fulfills mainly secondary education functions. The school is open to both Christians and Muslims, though its orientation in terms of religion is undoubtedly Christian as, according to one teacher there, “above all our school teaches Christian beliefs, the beliefs of Jesus Christ.”<sup>61</sup> Additionally, the school hosts a kindergarten, where all children, regardless of religious background, receive blessings from resident priests.<sup>62</sup> GOC-affiliated education institutions are not confined to Khulo. At a prominent September 2009 ceremony attended by high-ranking GOC and Adjara government officials, the Tbel Abuseridze State University was launched in the village of Khichauri in the Shuakhevi district.<sup>63</sup> Located on the grounds of a former military base and administered by the GOC, the university initially accepted 331 students primarily from upper Adjara and now hosts approximately 500 university students.<sup>64</sup> The university offers a typical selection of bachelor (Georgian philology, Georgian history, art, pedagogy, journalism, public administration, business administration, and medicine) and MA courses (Georgian history, public education management, Georgian literature, linguistics, journalism, and archaeology). Significantly, tuition and meals are completely free for the institution’s Adjara students.<sup>65</sup> This policy is an exception among Georgian state universities, as other public universities in the

<sup>58</sup> Sanikidze and Walker, op cit, Ref 14, p. 13. Muslim leaders in Khulo indicated a desire for the opening of a second mosque in Batumi, though the government has not seriously supported the plan to date.

<sup>59</sup> Interview at GOC-administered secondary school, Khulo, 18 October 2011.

<sup>60</sup> Incidentally, ‘Orthodox Parents’ Union’ has recently been disbanded. The organization’s website is no longer available, and eight of its members are currently in prison. Interview with Beka Mindiasvili, Tbilisi, 28 November 2011.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with internat school literature teacher, Khulo, 17 October 2011.

<sup>62</sup> Interview in Khulo, 1 November 2011.

<sup>63</sup> “Official opening of Tbel Abuseridze State University was held in Khichauri today,” Television of Adjara, 24 September 2009, <http://www.adjaratv.ge/en/index.php?page=shownews&id=6545>.

<sup>64</sup> A GOC-administered secondary school located adjacent to the university accommodates around 700 pupils.

<sup>65</sup> Interview at Tbel Abuseridze State University, Khichauri, 7 December 2011.



country charge tuition regardless of students' home region.<sup>66</sup>

Given its status as a public institution, the university is officially neutral with regards to religion. However, the primacy of orthodoxy is clear in the institution's administration, as the faculty is dominated by orthodox priests from other regions of Georgia. Orthodoxy also figures significantly in the instruction of history. One priest and history instructor stated that one of the goals of the university's history program is to "teach the correct facts" about religion in Adjara, which means treating orthodoxy as an essentially primordial aspect of Adjara's history, portraying Islam as a historical aberration precipitated by the Ottoman conquest, and emphasizing the need for the region to return to Georgia, so to speak, through conversion to Christianity.<sup>67</sup>

Another result of the GOC's expansion into upper Adjara is the accelerated construction of churches in the area. Notably, the construction of a new orthodox cathedral was begun in 2010 in Khulo-Centre. Perched on a prominent spot above the Batumi-Akhalsikhe highway, the structure is scheduled for completion in 2012 and will become the second orthodox church in the district's administrative centre. The pace of church construction has likewise quickened in Shuakhevi, where a church was recently finished in the village of Oladauri.<sup>68</sup> A new church is also in the process of construction on the grounds of Tbel Abuseridze State University.

While many Muslims in upper Adjara do not seem to resent the construction of churches per se, some Muslim leaders express dissatisfaction with what they perceive as the state's preference for the GOC, specifically with regards to material support for church

construction. One prominent Muslim leader in Khulo stated:

"We don't have a problem with the new church in Khulo, we want that to continue. But why is it that crosses can be seen all over our roads and in our villages? Why do they say that new churches must be built on every beautiful spot in Adjara when the population of Khulo is 99 percent Muslim? The church continues to receive help from the state, but we don't receive financial support for the renovation or upkeep of our mosques."<sup>69</sup>

Though the demographic figure of 99 percent Muslim is questionable given the number of conversions and the general lack of recent religious data in the area, a disparity in terms of state support for religious institutions is undeniable. As the specialist in religious issues, professor George Sanikidze stated, "Orthodoxy is financed, Islam is not." According to Sanikidze, the state's pro-orthodox funding tendencies are especially apparent in Khulo, where, in addition to the construction of a new church, the clergy's cars are financed by the state.<sup>70</sup>

The GOC's influence in upper Adjara seems likely to increase with additional church construction and continued GOC administration of key education institutions. This trend is not necessarily viewed as negative by much of the region's population, as GOC-affiliated education institutions generally have a reputation for competent instructors and high quality education.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, the exclusive focus of GOC-affiliated schools on Christianity and the Christian aspects of Georgian and Adjara history will likely lead to more conversions among younger segments of upper Adjara's population, thus accelerating the decline of the region's Islamic traditions.

## *5.2 Public Education in Upper Adjara: Implicit Orthodoxy*

Public secondary schools also play an important role in shaping religious identity in upper Adjara, though in a decidedly more balanced manner. Given their proliferation throughout the region and the various socio-economic and religious dichotomies among their

<sup>66</sup> Interview at Didadjara secondary school, 9 December 2011.

<sup>67</sup> This view was corroborated by several university students. According to the same priest, emphasis is placed on this particular conception of Adjara history because many of the region's youth pursue state-funded higher education in Turkey. In addition to developing a stronger sense of Islamic identity in Turkish universities, Adjara students apparently receive instruction about Adjara history which runs contrary to that imparted by the GOC. Interviews at Tbel Abuseridze State University, Khichauri, 7 December 2011.

<sup>68</sup> The church's inauguration was attended by Archbishop Dimitri of the Batumi and Skhalta Diocese, along with several high-ranking Adjara government officials. Moreover, 200 locals were christened during the church's opening. "Church Opened in Shuakhevi," Government of Autonomous Republic of Adjara, <http://www.ajara.gov.ge/eng/index.php?page=show&id=218>

<sup>69</sup> Interview at Khulo muftiate, 31 October 2011.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with professor George Sanikidze, Tbilisi, 11 November 2011.

<sup>71</sup> Interview in Khulo, 12 October 2011.



student bodies, public schools cater for a wider cross-section of upper Adjara's population. In the Khulo district, the GOC plays no direct role in the running of most public schools or the formulation of public education curriculum. At any rate, public schools are officially neutral with regards to religious matters as a result of the official separation of church and state policy defined in Georgia's constitution.<sup>72</sup>

Moreover, interviews and discussion groups in secondary schools in Khulo-Centre, Didadjara, and Riketi indicate essentially unanimous support among both Muslim and Christian school teachers for religious tolerance and freedom of religious choice. The director of Khulo-Centre's secondary school, a Muslim from the village of Didadjara, stated that the institution's religious diversity has never posed any problems in her five years as director. Correspondingly, several teachers indicated that it is not unusual for Muslim parents to have both a Bible and a Koran, so as to let their children read both and make their own religious choices.<sup>73</sup> Teachers in all three of the abovementioned locations are likewise supportive of freedom of religious choice among young people.

This sense of tolerance and objectivity is certainly genuine. It demonstrates the generally positive relations between religious groups in the area, particularly among middle class sectors of the population which tend more toward secularism. Nevertheless, certain aspects of the public school curriculum in upper Adjara reflect a slight preference for orthodoxy, particularly in the instruction of Georgian history. Given the structural factors outlined earlier in this paper, this trend is not entirely surprising. That the 2002 Concordat grants the GOC major consultative prerogatives in the field of public education curriculum likewise explains why orthodoxy has a slightly higher standing in institutions of public education.<sup>74</sup>

Most school teachers readily recognize orthodoxy's place in the curriculum, as the majority of religious questions in history textbooks deal with Christianity. Accordingly, teachers in Khulo indicate a particularly strong textbook emphasis on Saint Nino, who they say

converted to Christianity in 332 AD in the village of Didadjara. Textbooks also cover the story of St. Andrew, who is likewise alleged to have been an active Christian missionary in Adjara. The instruction of history thus assumes Christianity as a primordial aspect of Adjara's history, with one history teacher claiming that "Adjara led the rest of Georgia to Christianity."<sup>75</sup>

Students corroborated orthodoxy's place in the history curriculum. Gio, a Christian student in the eleventh class, indicated that his class's history textbook – and history instruction in general – referred to Christianity as the 'true religion.'<sup>76</sup> This is not to the exclusion of other religions in the curriculum, as textbooks address non-orthodox confessions and traditions as well. According to the director of Khulo's secondary school, the school offers a separate "Religion and Geography" course, in which students learn about various religions throughout the world.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, many instructors and students seem to view religion with the assumption that Christianity is a primordial element of Adjara's history.

This assumption is reinforced by how teachers view the three centuries during which Adjara was under Ottoman rule. The region's Ottoman history is seen by many – even a considerable number of Muslims – with some degree of disdain. A Muslim history teacher described the conversion process under the Ottomans as such:

"There is a book called Vakhtang Zoidze (Ardent Patriots) which describes how the Turks led Christians to the river Chorokhistskali. Threatening them with their swords, the Turks made the Christians trample on their own icons – otherwise they would have to cross the river – and told them 'let your Christ save you now.' It was only in seventeenth century that Georgians [Adjarians] were forced to become Muslims, and of course

<sup>72</sup> Constitution of the Republic of Georgia, Article IX.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Khulo secondary school director, 26 October 2011.

<sup>74</sup> In upper Adjara, the GOC has several clear prerogatives in terms of public education. Aside from those officially state schools under orthodox administration, the GOC administers and funds preparatory exam training for secondary students in Didadjara, Skhalta, and Khichauri. Interview at Didadjara secondary school, 9 December 2011.

<sup>75</sup> Interview in Khulo secondary school, 26 October 2011. It should likewise be noted that teachers in Didadjara (9 December 2011) and Riketi (12 December 2011) confirmed the instruction of this history in their respective schools.

<sup>76</sup> Interview in Khulo, 12 October 2011.

<sup>77</sup> During the 1990s and much of the early 2000s, a course by the title of 'Religious Upbringing' was also taught in secondary schools. Most Muslims viewed this course as propaganda on the part of the GOC, as it dealt specifically with the present role of orthodoxy and its place in Georgian history. However, the course was discontinued approximately six years ago. Interview at Adjara parliament, Batumik, 5 December 2011.



Georgians remember it more painfully. That memory has remained in Georgians' minds and made them hate this religion [Islam]."<sup>78</sup>

Still other stories from Adjara's Ottoman past influence how history is taught and how religion – at least implicitly – is viewed. Multiple references were made to a bridge in the Shuakhevi district, which was allegedly used by Ottoman authorities to execute Christians who refused to convert to Islam.<sup>79</sup> Many teachers also stated that Adjarans secretly kept their Christian traditions following mass conversions to Islam, a prime example being *mchata*, a type of bread with a cross cut into the top “so as to not forget our Christian past.” An additional claim is that Khulo's present-day mosque was originally a church before the Ottoman invasion and thus retains the shape of a cross.<sup>80</sup>

There is no doubt that religious subjects are covered in a more balanced manner in public secondary schools in upper Adjara. Moreover, relations between Muslims and Christians in Khulo's secondary school – where the greatest religious mix is likely to be found in upper Adjara – are quite good. Nevertheless, one is able to detect a slight bias toward Christianity in the instruction of history. Christianity is mostly conveyed as a primordial element of Adjara's history, while the history of Islam in the region is most often associated with the Ottoman conquest. Whereas these historical elements may hold some truth, the manner in which they are conveyed entails a judgment, however implicit, on the place and worth of each religion in the area. Thus by staking a primordial claim for Christianity while simultaneously associating Islam's history in Adjara with Turkish rule, the curriculum of public schools may in fact be providing the ideological base for conversions to Christianity among the younger segments of upper Adjara's population.

<sup>78</sup> Teacher focus group at Khulo secondary school, 26 October 2011.

<sup>79</sup> Teacher focus group at Khulo secondary school, 27 October 2011. Accordingly, so many Christians were apparently executed at this site that the river “ran red with blood.” In the course of research, however, no written record or reference of this event was found.

<sup>80</sup> This particular story seems questionable, as it would mean that the structure in question dates to the seventeenth century or earlier. Any visitor to the mosque can see that the mosque is not that old. Moreover, religion scholar Ruslan Baramidze (Batumi State University) puts the building's date at approximately 1829.

### *5.3 Local Mosques, Madrassahs, and Independent Muslim Organizations*

Mosques, madrassahs, and independent Muslim organizations constitute the third institutional category active in affecting religious identity in upper Adjara. This report has thus far focused on orthodox and public education institutions. Yet, it is a gross misstatement to suggest that Islamic institutions are inactive in upper Adjara.

Parallel to the experience of the GOC in the region, Moscow's weakening grip on power in the union republics in the late 1980s and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union gave impetus to Muslim mobilization in upper Adjara. Though local authorities were initially reluctant to support the reestablishment of Muslim institutions, the accession of Aslan Abashidze to the chairmanship of the Adjara government in 1991 ultimately facilitated more balanced government-Islam relations<sup>81</sup> and the proliferation of Muslim organizations in the region.<sup>82</sup> New mosques were opened, new religious organizations were formed, and new contacts were made with Islamic organizations in Turkey and the Arab world.<sup>83</sup> However, rifts within the Adjara Muslim community have caused the growth in Islamic activities to be asymmetric and uncoordinated.

According to a 2010 religious institution census released by the Niko Berdzenishvili Institute in Batumi, there are currently 184 active Muslim buildings in Adjara. Of these buildings, 119 are mosques (51 with an attached madrassah and nine with an attached madrassah-boarding school), 22 are seasonal mosques, 19 are free-standing madrassahs, 15 are prayer houses (i.e. mosques lacking key architectural/symbolic components), eight are madrassah-boarding schools, and one is a prayer house-madrassah. Khulo boasts more functioning Muslim religious buildings (77) than any other district

<sup>81</sup> Interview with religion expert Levan Abashidze, Tbilisi, 29 November 2011.

<sup>82</sup> A descendent of Muslim Adjara noblemen, Abashidze subsequently made an alliance with upper Adjara Muslim leaders to retain power in the mid-1990s, transforming Adjara into a personal fiefdom. Simultaneously, he publicly courted the GOC and maintained minimal oversight over its activities in the region.

<sup>83</sup> See Pelkmans (2006) for a detailed overview of Muslim mobilization in the 1990s.



in Adjara, followed by Shuakhevi (46), Keda (20), Khelvachauri (17), and Kobuleti (17).<sup>84</sup>

Accordingly, opportunities for basic religious schooling in the region have increased in the last two decades, despite institutions of Muslim education never having been a traditional part of Muslim life in upper Adjara.<sup>85</sup> Many mosques in the region are accompanied by madrassahs, usually comprised of a separate classroom within the mosque with religious texts and learning materials. These basic madrassahs offer Muslim educational services to locals, who can voluntarily take part in classes on weekends.<sup>86</sup> The village of Ghorjomi in western Khulo boasts an especially high density of mosques and madrassahs in relation to population.

More consequential with regards to religious education are boarding school-madrassahs, of which there are two in Khulo-Centre and approximately four in the rest of the Khulo district (Ghorjomi, Beghleti, Skhalta, and Khikhadziri).<sup>87</sup> Supported by Islamic charitable organizations with funding from Turkey, each school provides free room and board and hosts between 30-50 students, almost all of whom come from poorer families from upper Adjara's rural villages. Islamic schools do not function as a substitute for public education, as all students also attend public secondary schools. Each day after secondary school, however, madrassah students continue their studies with religious education and a select few secular subjects.<sup>88</sup> As such schools are neither state funded nor officially registered as educational institutions, there

are currently no mechanisms to review the content or quality of instruction.<sup>89</sup>

In terms of administration, Muslim affairs in Adjara officially fall under the auspices of the regional muftiate, or board of spiritual affairs, in Batumi. Chaired by Jemal Paksadze, the mufti of both Adjara and Georgia's wider Muslim community, Adjara's muftiate is tasked with addressing religious problems and general issues of religious importance in the region. This administrative structure is similarly replicated on the district level. Each district in Adjara has its own muftiate and mufti responsible for corresponding with district imams, who lead prayers in individual mosques. In turn, district muftis report any religious issues in their respective areas of supervision to the muftiate in Batumi.

Nevertheless, relations between the official muftiate and district muftiates are not always in accordance. Specifically, some Muslim leaders in Adjara's districts opine that the official muftiate in Batumi maintains excessively close relations with the government and thus lacks neutrality in religious affairs.<sup>90</sup> While the situation does not constitute a schism, there seems to be a lack of coordination and communication between the official muftiate in Batumi and the Muslim administrations in the districts. Given the somewhat dysfunctional administrative situation, local Muslim institutions in Adjara largely rely on independent charitable Muslim organizations active in the region. These organizations include the Association of Aid for Georgian Youth (SADA), Madli-2005, the Union of Theologians, the Association of Translation of the Koran in Georgian and Scientific Research, the Union of Georgian Muslims, and the Association of friendship between Georgia and Turkey. In the absence of government funding for nearly all Muslim institutions, such organizations play a key role for the functioning of mosques and madrassahs. Partnerships between Muslim organizations and mosques, madrassahs, and district-level muftiates entail financial support for mosque construction and renovation, the functioning of Muslim boarding schools, and the supplying of food on major Islamic holidays.<sup>91</sup>

Not all independent Islamic organizations enjoy stellar relations with the official muftiate either. As with many local Islamic institutions in Adjara's

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<sup>84</sup> Ruslan Baramidze, "Active Muslim Religious and Teaching Buildings – Adjaran Autonomous Republic", Niko Berdzenishvili Institute, 2010.

<sup>85</sup> Even under Ottoman rule, few religious education institutions were established. Rather, Adjarans typically received religious training and education in Istanbul. Interview at Adjaran parliament, Batumi, 5 December 2011.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with mufti Aslan Abashidze, Duadzebi, 31 October 2011.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with mufti Aslan Abashidze, Khulo, 8 December 2011.

<sup>88</sup> According to the regional director of Khulo's Muslim boarding schools, students study religion for one and a half hours each day, focusing mainly on "the stories of Muhammad, the conditions of Muslims in early times, and also what role Islam can play in their future lives." Christianity, though obviously not espoused in the boarding schools, is briefly addressed. Additionally, select secular subjects and exam preparation are a common element in these schools. Interview at Khulo muftiate, 28 October 2011.

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<sup>89</sup> Interview with professor Ruslan Baramidze, Batumi, 6 December 2011.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> The organization Madli-2005, for example, is responsible for administering the six boarding school-madrassahs in the Khulo district mentioned above.



districts, some of these organizations view the muftiate as a veritable extension of the government.<sup>92</sup> Likewise, relations among these Islamic organizations are often out of sync owing largely to divergent theological opinions. According to one Adjaraan government official, such theological disagreements are harmful because they ultimately lead to fractures among Adjara's Muslim community. Accordingly, there tends to be relatively little cooperation between Islamic organizations on major religious holidays, as each plans its own celebrations and has little or no interaction with other organizations.<sup>93</sup>

With the lack of state funding for Islamic institutions and organizations in Adjara, outside sources of funding and support are crucial. Turkey plays a central role in the financing of Muslim organizations and, by extension, the operation of local Muslim institutions. For example, each Georgian Muslim organization is linked with a Turkish religious foundation responsible for channeling financial and material support.<sup>94</sup> The Diyanet İleri Başkanlığı (Presidency of Religious Affairs) – the highest official Islamic authority in Turkey – likewise supports Adjara's Muslim community. Namely, the Diyanet cooperates with the region's spiritual board and encourages young Adjaraan Muslims to study religion in Turkey.<sup>95</sup> Additionally, private Turkish citizens – often members of Turkey's ethnic Georgian community – provide significant amounts of financial

support to Adjaraan Muslim institutions and organizations in the form of private donations.<sup>96,97</sup>

Turkey also exerts indirect influence on Adjara's religious affairs by virtue of education-related migratory patterns. This pattern entails temporary relocation of young Adjaraans to Turkish cities for purposes of both religious and secular higher education. Significant numbers of Muslim leaders in Adjara receive religious training at Muslim institutions in Turkey<sup>98</sup>, and so-called "Koran courses" – also administered in Turkey – remain popular among the younger, more religious segments of Adjara's Muslim population.<sup>99</sup> Because Turkish higher education is free, many Adjaraan students also choose to study secular subjects in Turkey. Despite the non-religious nature of this type of education, Adjaraan students often develop a stronger sense of Muslim identity in Turkey, which they subsequently bring back to Georgia.<sup>100</sup>

Islamic regeneration has occurred in parallel with the expansion of the GOC in upper Adjara. The last two decades have seen the proliferation of numerous local Islamic institutions and organizations and, indeed, an increase in religiosity among certain segments of the population. However, the asymmetry of this process has led to rifts within Adjara's Muslim community – specifically, between the official muftiate and local Islamic institutions and organizations, and even among independent organizations themselves – and the primacy of foreign actors in terms of funding and religious education, especially Turkish religious organizations. Simultaneously, many Adjaraan Muslims feel that the traditional lack of state support for Muslim institutions is a sign of state discrimination against Islam. As will be addressed in the next section, the Georgian government has recently made a number of unilateral policy decisions in the field of minority religious

<sup>92</sup> There are exceptions to this trend. The official muftiate enjoys good relations with SADA, and there is even some overlap in personnel between the two entities.

<sup>93</sup> Interview at Adjaraan parliament, Batumi, 5 December 2011.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with professor Ruslan Baramidze, Batumi, 6 December 2011.

<sup>95</sup> The Diyanet is responsible for convening the Eurasian Islamic Council (EIC), which began in 1995 and is intended to facilitate cooperation between spiritual boards throughout the Muslim areas of the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia. The seventh EIC (2009), for example, passed a resolution to translate and publish Islamic literature in a number of native languages. In 2008, the Diyanet published six thousand copies of a booklet called "I am Learning my Religion" in Georgian, along with other booklets such as "I am Learning about my Book" and "I am Learning about my Prophet." Moreover, the Diyanet has played an important role in Muslim education. In 2008, the organization provided 139 stipends to Georgian Muslims to take part in "Koran Courses" in Turkey. enol Korkut, "The Diyanet of Turkey and Its Activities in Eurasia after the Cold War," in *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, Tomus 28 (2009), pp. 125-126; pp. 132-133.

<sup>96</sup> While funding from Turkish organizations and private donors is a well-known fact, the process is not transparent and exact amounts of financial support are difficult to calculate. Interview with professor George Sanikidze, Tbilisi, November 11, 2011.

<sup>97</sup> Many new and renovated mosques in upper Adjara display plaques referencing private donors based in Turkey. A plaque beside the entrance of Didadjara's renovated historic mosque, for example, reads "Opened for worship by the Samsun-Batra'lı Aydın and Ahmed Karahmeto-Gunar brothers in 2002" in both Georgian and Turkish.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with mufti Jemal Paksadze, Batumi, 13 December 2011.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with professor Ruslan Baramidze, Batumi, 6 December 2011.

<sup>100</sup> Interview with professor George Sanikidze, Tbilisi, 11 November 2011.



issues, decisions which are supposedly intended to address issues in Adjara's Muslim community and other minority religious groups.

## VI. PERCEPTIONS OF MUSLIM EXCLUSION AND THE PUSH FOR CIVIC INTEGRATION

The dominant nationalist discourse, the primacy of orthodoxy in the public education history curriculum, and the state's support for the GOC in post-Soviet Georgia pose certain problems for Adjara's Muslim community. To be sure, inter-religious relations in the region are good, and Adjara's Muslims generally do not exhibit antipathy toward their neighbors who subscribe to different religious traditions. Yet, a sense of discrimination among the region's Muslim leadership and the more religiously observant (i.e., non-middle class) segments of the Muslim population is undeniable.

Many observant Muslims in Adjara express frustration with what they view as orthodoxy's monopoly on Georgian national identity, for Georgian Muslims generally express an equally ardent sense of patriotism as their Christian counterparts. All Georgian Muslims who were interviewed during the course of ECMI fieldwork in Adjara claimed loyalty to the Georgian nation and were adamant that their affiliation with Islam did not put them at odds with national interests. One prominent Muslim leader from Khulo stated in an interview, "We want our [Georgian] state to be strong, we like democratic laws. Our country strives for Euro-Atlantic integration, and we Muslims support it."<sup>101</sup>

Information gathered during ECMI interviews suggests that some Muslims retain a mild sense of social exclusion as a result of Georgia's nationalism paradigm. Mufti of Georgia Jemal Paksadze described this sentiment as such:

"Earlier, the government never consulted with Muslims on the question of religion and national identity. Therefore, Muslims really never had opportunities to cultivate relationships with the government or establish faculties for religious training. We do not want the government to put our religion on a

pedestal, we simply want equalization [with the Georgian Orthodox Church]. Georgian Muslims make sacrifices for the Georgian nation as well. For example, many Muslims serve in the army, but such things often go unrecognized."<sup>102</sup>

Thus a common perception among Muslims is that many Christian Georgians do not view them as legitimate stakeholders in the modern Georgian nation-state.

Muslim perceptions of social exclusion are evident in other contexts, especially with regard to the government's seeming lack of concern for the condition and operation of Muslim institutions. In sharp contrast to GOC institutions in Adjara, Muslim institutions – with the exception of the Batumi mosque, which is covered below – do not receive any state funding for renovation, construction, or education. Rather, Muslim institutions are largely reliant on donations and Turkish funding, though even these financial sources are not enough to shrink the resource gap with the GOC.<sup>103</sup>

For many Muslims in upper Adjara, perceptions of state discrimination were crystallized by an incident in early 2010 related to the Muslim charitable foundation Madli-2005 in the Khulo district. According to a report released by the Tbilisi based Human Rights Center, a religious school operated by Madli-2005 in Khulo-Centre was closed by local authorities after a judgment was handed down by the Khelvachauri district court, which stated that Madli-2005 had failed to pay taxes on the school and was guilty of "false substitution" of property.<sup>104</sup> Shota

<sup>102</sup> Interview with mufti Jemal Paksadze, Batumi, 13 December 2011.

<sup>103</sup> The case of the Shuakhevi district muftiate is especially telling in this regard. The muftiate is located in the village of Khichauri, adjacent to the Tbel Abuseridze State University. Whereas the GOC-administered university occupies a heavily guarded, expansive former military base which was essentially granted by the state to the GOC, the Shuakhevi district muftiate is located in a small former television station. The muftiate's current building was sold to the district Muslim administration in a 2010 state auction. Interview with Shuakhevi district mufti, Batumi, 10 December 2011.

<sup>104</sup> According to the report, false substitution refers to the act of registering an individual as the official owner of a property, though in reality that property is owned by another individual or organization. In this case, the Khelvachauri district court claimed that Madli-2005 actually owned the houses in which its schools operated, though in fact all

<sup>101</sup> Interview with mufti Aslan Abashidze, Khulo, 31 October 2011.



Gabaidze, the foundation's head and a member of its board of directors, was arrested in 2009 for tax evasion. He was subsequently released on a plea bargain, though he was forced to pay a fine of GEL 5,000 and sign the Madli-2005 building over to the state.<sup>105</sup> Shortly thereafter in 2010, local authorities moved to close the school.<sup>106</sup>

In Khulo-Centre, the attempted closure of the Madli-2005 school resulted in a number of protests among local Muslims. The independent television station TV 25 was present at the second major protest, with journalists conducting interviews with protestors and local government figures. In an interview with TV 25 journalists, one older woman stated, "We Georgians are the same, regardless of whether we are Muslim or Christian. We don't want this school to close; we want it preserved for our children and for our future. Everybody can pray where they want, there are churches as well as mosques. We don't bother anyone so they shouldn't bother us." The positive social role of the school in the community was also cited by protestors. According to another woman, "This is a great school. Here they dress, feed and teach poor children. They teach them civility so when they go out

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leased properties were registered as the property of Jumber Kakhadze, a private citizen and resident of the village Beghleti.

More troubling is the fact that the National Agency of Public Registration confirmed Kakhadze's ownership of the Khulo property, which had already been leased to Madli-2005 for a period of ten years. The Adjara Execution Bureau requested the extraction of the property from the Public Registry. Though the request was initially refused, the Public Registry eventually issued the extraction on June 10, 2011 whereupon the property was listed as belonging to the Autonomous Republic of Adjara. The legal basis for the extraction was "Resolution #495 of the Government of Georgia 24.04.2010," though at the point of the extraction the Georgian government had only enacted 165 resolutions during 2010. Thus the extraction was apparently carried out at the behest of individuals in the government, rather than through resolution #495.

<sup>105</sup> This was in fact legally untenable, as the rest of the organization's board members would have had to sign the agreement to legally transfer the property to the state. Madli-2005 and opponents of the state's actions maintain that the transfer of property to the state was untenable in the first place because the building technically belonged to a private citizen and not the charitable organization. As for the issue of taxes, figures connected with the organization told ECMI that Madli-2005 should not have been subject to taxes because it relies exclusively on charitable donations.

<sup>106</sup> "Muslim Protest," in Religions in Georgia, the Human Rights Center (HRIDC), 16 February 2011 <http://religiabi.info/index.php?a=main&pid=17&lang=eng>.

in the streets they won't become bandits." An older man stated that the school's students "study honesty and kindness. Yes, they study religion but these traits are incorporated in the religion."<sup>107</sup>

Following Gabaidze's transfer of the building to the government, authorities had originally intended to establish a 'youth centre' in the school.<sup>108</sup> In light of the strong reaction from local Muslims, however, the state partially backed down and transferred jurisdiction of the building to the Adjara muftiate in Batumi. The building is now operational again, and Madli-2005 has continued its administration of religious education at the building.

In many respects, the Madli-2005 incident was a watershed moment in state-Muslim relations in upper Adjara, for rarely have such sentiments been publicly expressed in such large numbers since the early 1990s. The episode was also important because it came at a time when the Georgian government could not afford such a potentially explosive public relations disaster. Specifically, the authorities' actions were in sharp contrast to the official policy of civic integration, which Georgia's post-rose revolution government has pursued in order to strengthen relations with the West and prepare Georgia for a possible EU candidacy bid.<sup>109</sup>

Whereas the Saakashvili government paid comparatively little attention to minority religious rights during much of its tenure,<sup>110</sup> a number of developments in 2011 suggest that the government may be treating the issue of civic integration and minority religious groups more seriously. The first such development was the creation of the Administration of Georgian Muslims (AGM) in

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<sup>107</sup> P'rot'est'I khuloshi, TV 25, 31 July 2010,

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXA7ATqaYVw>.

<sup>108</sup> Jumber Kakhadze, the owner of the building, claimed that Khulo district governor Levan Abashidze indicated the building would be transferred to the jurisdiction of the GOC, a claim which Abashidze denied.

<sup>109</sup> As one Georgian political analyst notes, "Georgia's insistence on being a liberal democracy is largely identity-driven, in the sense that the country wants to be a liberal democracy in order to prove that it is Western and that it can be a modern nation-state..." However, such modernizing projects often lead to a backlash by conservative elements – in this case the GOC – who view 'liberal ideology' as a threat to the traditional conception of the nation. Ghia Nodia, "Georgia: Dimensions of Insecurity," in *Statehood and Security: Georgia After the Rose Revolution*, Bruno Coppieters and Robert Legvold, eds., The MIT Press, Cambridge (2005), p. 73.

<sup>110</sup> See *ibid*.



May.<sup>111</sup> Though officially not a state body, the AGM was established with assistance from the Georgian government. The body is led by sheikh Vagip Akapilov, an ethnic Azeri from the Kvemo Kartli region; mufti Jemal Paksadze, who now serves as mufti of both Adjara and all of Georgia; and imam Iasin Aliyev, who leads prayers at Tbilisi's Juma Mosque. The AGM officially serves all of Georgia's Muslim groups – ethnic Azeris in Kvemo Kartli and ethnic Kists in Pankisi included – with the goal of representing them on the state level and – according to one senior member of the body – to act as a “bridge between the Muslim community and the Georgian government.”<sup>112</sup>

The second major development regarding civic integration and minority religions was the Saakashvili government's passage of a law on the registration of minority religious groups in July. Under the new law, those religious groups with “close historic ties to Georgia” may register as so-called entities of public law. This legal status, which is currently held by most government bodies as well as the GOC, is an improvement over the status traditionally held by minority religious groups – noncommercial entity of private law. Whereas the former provides official recognition as a religious group, the latter is equivalent to the legal status of a non-governmental organization.<sup>113</sup> Following the law's passage, the AGM was registered as an entity of public law, along with the Caucasus Administration of Latin Catholics, the Chaldo-Assyrian Catholic community of Georgia, and the Spiritual Assembly of Yazidis of Georgia.<sup>114</sup> Thus these minority religious groups officially have legal parity with the GOC, though in reality the 2002 Concordat provides for a considerably more privileged standing for the church.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>111</sup> Since the 1980s, Caucasian Muslims fell under the religious jurisdiction of the Baku-based Caucasus Board of Muslims (CBM). Led by Alahshukur Pashazade, the CBM was essentially a state controlled religious entity aimed at controlling Muslim affairs in the region. After the fall of the USSR, the board remained in place and retained spiritual jurisdiction, so to speak, over the region's Muslims. Unsurprisingly, the CBM's reaction to the creation of the AGM was not favorable.

<sup>112</sup> Shahin Abbasov, “Azerbaijan and Georgia: Rival Groups Seek to Speak for Georgia's Muslims,” EurasiaNet, 7 July 2011, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/63822>.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> “Four Groups Registered For Now Under New Law of Legal Status of Religious Minorities,” Civil Georgia, 28 September 2011, <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23974>.

<sup>115</sup> Nevertheless, the GOC is highly critical of the registration law. In addition to feeling excluded from the

There has been some criticism of how these measures were passed. Religion expert Levan Abashidze maintains that, though a seemingly positive step, the Georgian government entirely neglected to consult the relevant religious communities before the measures were put into effect.<sup>116</sup> One EU official also claimed that these developments were more an indication of the government's wish to please the West while simultaneously hindering the self-organization of independent religious groups out of the government's supervision.<sup>117</sup> Additionally, ECMI research conducted in the Kvemo Kartli region in 2011 suggests that many of Georgia's ethnic Azeris have reacted negatively to the AGM and registration law.<sup>118</sup>

However, the reception of the AGM and the law on registration has generally been positive among Adjara Muslims. First of all, the measures have already yielded a few tangible benefits. Before the passage of the registration law, Muslim religious figures held unofficial documentation of their respective religious titles (e.g., imam, mufti). However, Muslim leaders are now able to officially document their positions on special registration lists, thus conceivably increasing their legitimacy in the eyes of their religious constituents. The process of building a mosque, previously complicated and always contingent on the permission of local authorities, has been made easier, at least in theory.<sup>119</sup> There have also been financial benefits in one case. Specifically, the mosque in Batumi – also the seat of the region's

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decision-making process, many church officials see the law as an attack on the church and the Georgian nation. In their view, the government has made concessions to ‘foreign’ religious groups by allowing these groups to claim and register ‘territory’ (i.e., religious buildings) within Georgia; conversely, the GOC has not been granted reciprocal status in Turkey or Armenia, where a considerable number of historic Georgian orthodox sites are located. Speaking about the law, one orthodox priest in Khulo said, “There is a lot of Georgian territory [churches and monasteries] in Turkey and Armenia, and yet if I go there, I am not allowed the same rights because the Georgian Orthodox Church doesn't have the same status there [as foreign religious groups have here]. That's what the registration law is about. Why should we give them status in Georgia if they aren't willing to reciprocate?” Interview in Khulo, 18 October 2011.

<sup>116</sup> Interview with religion expert Levan Abashidze, Tbilisi, 29 November 2011.

<sup>117</sup> Interview in Tbilisi, 29 November 2011.

<sup>118</sup> See Conor Prasad, ECMI Working Paper #58 “Georgia's Muslim Community: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?”

<sup>119</sup> No new mosque construction has commenced since the measures' implementation. Interview with professor Ruslan Baramidze, Batumi, 6 December 2011.



official muftiate – has begun to receive financial support from the state for renovation.<sup>120</sup>

Every Muslim leader interviewed by ECMI either had a positive view of or were hopeful of the potential of the AGM and law on registration, for many Muslims have long wished for an organization with the authority to represent their religious interests on the national level. Nevertheless, Muslim leaders recognize that these measures may prove ineffectual in the long run. Aside from the mosque in Batumi, no other Islamic building in Adjara has been officially registered under the provisions of the new law, which is a prerequisite for receiving financial support from the state. Khulo mufti Aslan Abashidze stated that the Khulo muftiate administration has already made several requests to the state for financial support for mosque renovation, but to no avail. “It would be nice to have state funding for the upkeep of our mosques. However, we can never be sure if the government will actually respond to our requests. We have already made a number of requests, but they still haven’t answered”<sup>121</sup> Mufti Jemal Paksadze likewise conceded that additional funding is largely contingent on what the government decides.<sup>122</sup>

Thus the creation of the AGM and the new law on registration both appear as positive steps toward civic integration and closer relations with Europe. However, the measures’ effectiveness is largely dependent on the benefits they bring to Adjara’s Muslim community and Adjara Muslims’ perception of their effectiveness. Though religious figures have been officially registered and renovation of the Batumi mosque is underway, funding requests for other Muslim buildings in Adjara have gone unanswered. All Muslim leaders hope for an uptick in state support, yet most are cognizant of the future uncertainty of the measures.

## VII. CONCLUSION

This working paper has sought to provide an accurate account of the current religious situation in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara. The region’s Muslim identity has indeed been weakened in light of post-Soviet political developments, which have entailed the essentially exclusive association between Georgian orthodoxy and Georgian national identity. As a result,

<sup>120</sup> During the course of ECMI fieldwork in early December this renovation was already in progress.

<sup>121</sup> Interview with mufti Aslan Abashidze, Khulo, 8 December 2011.

<sup>122</sup> Interview with mufti Jemal Paksadze, Batumi, 13 December 2011.

certain segments of Adjara’s Muslim population – for example, the young, the socially mobile, the relatively well educated middle class, and urbanites – have reconfigured their religious identity, sometimes opting for conversion to Christianity, other times simply diminishing their Muslim identity. Simultaneously, the Georgian Orthodox Church has made inroads in Adjara, most noticeably in the lowlands and to a lesser – yet growing – extent in the highland districts of Shuakhevi and Khulo. Church construction has continued, and many important education institutions in the region are administered by the GOC. Moreover, in secondary schools, the instruction of religion’s role in Georgian history is focused almost exclusively on Christianity, largely as a result of the GOC’s consultative prerogatives in the field of public education.

Yet, there remains a sizeable segment of Adjara’s population that is keen to preserve its Muslim traditions. Such Muslims are adamant about their loyalty to the Georgian nation and, unlike many other Georgians, they do not see a contradiction between their Muslim beliefs and their Georgian identity. Above all, perhaps, Adjara’s Muslims wish for effective civic integration and the development of a civic nationalism that is not contingent on religious affiliation. It is also important to recognize that, despite the GOC’s expansion in the region and the growing preponderance among Adjara Muslims to convert to Christianity, the reemergence of Muslim institutions has likewise taken place, though this growth has admittedly been asymmetrical given theological and geographical divergences within the region’s Muslim community, not to mention foreign influences.

As noted, relations between religious groups in Adjara are generally positive, though problems associated with Muslim perceptions of social exclusion remain an issue. The Georgian government’s recent measures on the representation and status of religious minority groups signal a positive step in Georgia’s civic integration project. Likewise, the government – at least publicly – regularly promotes inter-religious dialogue, as it is quite common for Saakashvili and other government officials (in particular, the chairman of the Government of Adjara Levan Varshalomidze) to congratulate Muslims on major Islamic holidays. However, there are a number of steps the Georgian government could take to further ameliorate the religious situation in Adjara.

In the field of public education, the Georgian government could partially reassess the instruction of history in Adjara’s secondary schools. In terms of religion in the Georgian context, the current history



curriculum focuses exclusively on orthodoxy. That orthodoxy occupies a significant role is not problematic in itself, for Christianity indeed has a long association with Georgia and should be taught as an element of the country's history. The main problem is that Islam in the Adjara context is not sufficiently covered. When teachers do breach the subject, Islam is often conveyed as a historical aberration imposed by Ottoman conquerors on primordially Christian Adjarians. This historical conception essentially ignores the fact that many Adjarians do not view Islam as a mere historical aberration, and they would accordingly like to retain their Muslim traditions. Thus a refined curriculum might include the objective instruction of both the Christian and Islamic elements of Adjara's history. In this way, social inclusion could be facilitated from an early age, as the notion that one must categorically subscribe to orthodoxy in order to be considered a true Georgian could be challenged.

Another issue the Georgian government should address relates to religious training for Muslim leaders. During the course of ECMI interviews in Adjara, a number of interviewees expressed concerns about the quality of religious education that Adjara Muslims receive in Turkey and other foreign locations. One Adjara government official claimed that many religious officials who study abroad gain a shallow understanding of Islam and are not able to discuss religious matters fluently.<sup>123</sup> In other cases, the religious values that foreign trained Georgian Muslim leaders gather abroad and import to Georgia often diverge from local customs in the Georgian context, thus creating an uncomfortable situation in which foreign theological elements clash with accepted tradition.<sup>124</sup>

Accordingly, the Georgian government could facilitate greater opportunities for domestic Islamic education. Namely, a religious faculty could be created in Tbilisi with the express purpose of training the country's Islamic clergy. Of course, arrangements would have to be made for the training of Georgia's Sunni and Shiite groups, but the basic premise remains the same. In this manner, the government could facilitate the implementation of religious training that satisfies the spiritual needs of Georgia's Muslim communities while preventing clashes between religious doctrine and cultural tradition. It should also be mentioned that many of Adjara's Muslim leaders expressed an interest in domestic religious education.

<sup>123</sup> Interview at Adjara parliament, Batumi, 5 December 2011.

<sup>124</sup> Interview with professor Ruslan Baramidze, Batumi, 6 December 2011.

Likewise, several religion experts and government officials have made similar recommendations.

Finally, the issue of funding deserves a closer look. In order to follow up on its recent civic integration initiatives, the Georgian government may consider the possibility of providing some funding for Muslim institutions in Adjara. Though the mosque in Batumi has been registered and is already receiving state support for renovation, other Muslim buildings in Adjara have yet to be registered. The government could possibly devise a funding method for religious institutions in the more rural areas in Adjara, such as providing a lump sum to district muftiates whereupon local Muslim leaders could decide which religious buildings receive material support.

Funding is, understandably, a thorny issue. Adjara's Muslim leaders are aware that extensive state funding for mosques and madrassahs may very well be a chimera. Concurrently, many elements in the government seem unlikely to support the idea of such financial support, at least on a large scale. One official at the Georgian Public Defender's Office, though generally critical of the GOC, expressed opposition to the entire concept of granting public status to more religious groups because "the state will be obligated to pay for all of them."<sup>125</sup> Constitutionality is also an issue when discussing state support for Muslim institutions, given that Article IX calls for the separation between religion and state. Of course, the state has technically been contravening the constitution for the last two decades by providing direct financial support to the GOC. Many Muslim leaders in Adjara recognize this reality and are thus inclined to call for a relationship with the state similar to what the GOC enjoys.

The religious situation in Adjara is complex and, given recent developments, it is likely to remain so in the years to come. This working paper has sought to provide a picture of the current religious situation in the region, focusing especially on the tendency of many Adjarians to convert to Christianity, the effects of education institutions on religious life in upper Adjara, and recent state religious policies and issues within the Muslim community.

<sup>125</sup> Interview with the head of the Public Defender's Tolerance Centre Beka Mindiashvili, Tbilisi, 28 November 2011. Accordingly, Mindiashvili believes the distinction between "public" versus "private" entity should not be made at all, which includes the GOC. However, given the vast prerogatives the GOC currently enjoys, it would be next to impossible to downgrade the church's legal status. Such a policy would likely create considerable conflict and be tantamount to political suicide for the current government.



However, further work is needed to gain a deeper understanding of a number of issues, including the role and divergent theological opinions of independent Islamic organizations in the region; the role of Turkish religious training; and a village-by-village quantitative study of Adjarans' perceptions of the religious situation in their region and their trust in religious institutions. Furthermore, the government would do well to implement its civic integration measures (i.e., AGM and the law on registration) in Adjara by consulting with members of the region's Muslim community rather than acting unilaterally, as well as by ensuring that this program actually has

tangible benefits for the community in question. Above all, the government should strive to see that ethnic Georgian Muslims be treated fairly and respectfully, and that they be regarded as legitimate members of the Georgian citizenry regardless of their religious beliefs.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

#### Thomas Liles

Thomas Liles is an alumnus of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and currently works at the Dinu Patriciu Eurasia Center at the Atlantic Council in Washington, DC. Thomas Liles worked as a visiting researcher for ECMI in Georgia in the second part of 2011.

\*Contact: [taliles99@gmail.com](mailto:taliles99@gmail.com)

### FOR FURTHER INFORMATION SEE

#### EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR MINORITY ISSUES (ECMI)

Schiffbruecke 12 (Kompagnietor) D-24939 Flensburg

( +49-(0)461-14 14 9-0 \* fax +49-(0)461-14 14 9-19

\* E-Mail: [info@ecmi.de](mailto:info@ecmi.de) \* Internet: <http://www.ecmi.de>