

Challenges to coexistence in Georgia

The exclusion of minorities from Georgia's national identity has contributed to tensions between ethnic and religious communities. These give cause for concern. New governmental policies seem to be headed in the right direction but need to be better implemented and reinforced if the roots of the problem are to be addressed.

By Angela Ullmann

Since the turn of the 21st century, the need to understand the role of religion in conflict better has become apparent. Religion can bring people together and it can divide them. One way in which religion can divide people is as a source of identity, when it serves to demarcate the boundaries between different communities. This is the case with recent inter-communal tensions in Georgia, where religious identities are one important constituting factor in defining majority-minority differences.

The South Caucasus is the site of unresolved territorial conflicts in Georgia (South Ossetia and Abkhazia) and between Azerbaijan and Armenia (Nagorno-Karabakh). These conflicts present great barriers to economic growth and social well-being, especially for refugees, internally displaced persons, and people living in rural areas. Apart from these territorial conflicts, Georgia is also dealing with less visible tensions between the ethnic Georgian Orthodox majority population and its ethnically diverse Muslim minorities. Muslim minorities aren't the only ones to experience tense relations with the Georgian Orthodox majority; Armenian members of the Apostolic Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Baptists are also subject to discrimination. However, recent incidents between Orthodox and Muslim communi-



Muslim leaders thank Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili for his support. The government's recent initiatives promoting religious coexistence seem to bear fruits. *Government of Georgia*

ties over houses of prayer and religious teaching have put a spotlight on the Orthodox-Muslim relationship (see box).

At the core of these tense relations are questions of Georgian nationalism and political inclusion. The various Muslim minority communities have not been adequately included in the process of constructing a national Georgian identity after the collapse of the Soviet Union in

1991. This majority-minority relationship harbors the potential for political volatility due to its religious dimension, which could eventually harden political conflict around religious identities. The disputes since 2012 reflect rifts in Georgia's society that threaten to grow deeper. The promotion of a national identity inclusive of all citizens of Georgia is urgently needed. Otherwise, the exclusion of national minorities could turn into a source of political conflict.

The Georgian context is of importance to Switzerland for three reasons. *First*, Georgia is geopolitically located on an energy transportation route from east to west and plays a major role in certain security- and migration-related questions. *Second*, as part of Switzerland's regional South Caucasus approach, a peaceful and prosperous Georgia is a priority of Berne's peace promotion engagement. From 2013–2016, Switzerland will have invested CHF 110 million in the region in different projects, ranging from economic development and job creation to good governance and public services as well as human rights and peace promotion. The question of how to assist Georgia without fueling tensions vis-à-vis Russia is key – a challenge Switzerland has dealt with well in the past, as its role as a trusted mediator between Russia and Georgia shows. *Third*, the question of how to deal with national Muslim minorities has become a pressing question not only for Georgia, but also for Switzerland.

The Quest for Identity

Religion and ethnicity are two comparatively strong societal forces by which people in Georgia identify themselves and others. Due to the ethnically and religiously mixed history of the South Caucasus, citizens of Georgia come from diverse ethnic or religious backgrounds. Linguistic barriers exist in some cases, especially be-

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tween peripheral regions and central Georgia. According to the most recent available census (2002), out of 4.37 million people in Georgia, 84 per cent identified as *Georgian Orthodox*, 10 per cent identified as *Muslim*, 4 per cent as *Armenian-Gregorian*, and a total of 2 per cent as *Catholic*, *Jewish*, and *Other*. Regarding ethnic affiliation, 84 per cent identified as ethnic Georgians, while 16 per cent of Georgia's population identified as an ethnic minority: 6.5 per cent as Azeri, 5.7 per cent as Armenian, 1.5 per cent as Russian, and a total of 2 per cent as Ossetian, Yezidi, Greek, Kist, Ukrainian, or Abkhazian. The data is helpful for understanding the proportions, but the numbers need to be taken with a pinch of salt. There are three main Muslim communities in Georgia: *First*, ethnic Azeris, who are predominantly Shi'ite Muslims concentrated in the Kvemo-Kartli and Kakheti regions;

second, ethnic Georgian Sunni Muslims, of whom many live in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara; and *third*, ethnic Kist Sunni Muslims in the Pankisi Gorge in the Kakheti region (see map). Religious minorities don't necessarily belong to an ethnic minority, but can be part of the ethnic majority group. The same may be true for ethnic minorities, which do not necessarily belong to a minority religion. Ethnic Armenians are an example: While 4 per cent out of 5.7 per cent ethnic Armenians stated they were adherents of the Armenian-Gregorian faith, some of the remaining 1.7 per cent are likely of Georgian Orthodox faith, thus belonging to the religious majority group. Religious and ethnic cleavages don't always overlap, so that the 16 per cent ethnic minorities are not entirely identical with the 16 per cent religious minorities. This makes majority-minority relations complex.

These realities clash with widely-held beliefs about what makes someone *Georgian*. Even though national minority citizens are recognized by the state as regular citizens, in common parlance in Georgia being *Georgian* means being of Georgian ethnicity and belonging to the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC). There is no strong notion (yet) of being Georgian outside of Georgian ethnicity and the GOC. The legacy of an imposed Soviet atheist identity, which subdued personal ethnic and religious identities, has probably contributed to the lack of a strong civic identity. The religious and ethnic elements of being *Georgian* create a double exclusion mechanism, which means that more than 16 per cent of Georgia's population are not recognized as *citizens of Georgia* by a large part of the population even if they are formally recognized as such by the state. This is highly problematic for the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation state, because it limits the feeling of national belonging to Orthodox ethnic Georgians, the majority group. Without wider societal recognition, minority-group citizens lack the social legitimacy to participate in the socio-political spaces and express their communities' concerns in the national arena.

Tensions over Places of Prayer

Between 2012 and 2014, Georgia saw a number of local disputes between majority and minority communities escalating around Muslim places of prayer and religious teaching. The incidents quickly made national media headlines. The seven inci-

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Incidents were reported to have taken place in the villages of Nigvziani in mid-2012 (Guria region), Tsintsarko in November 2012 (Kvemo-Kartli region), and Samtatskaro in May 2013 (Kakheti region). In all three cases, local Orthodox residents are said to have taken offense at the existence of a mosque in their village and blocked Muslims from leaving or entering the mosque for prayer. The Minister of Justice asked the **Patriarchate to mediate a peaceful solution**. The active disputes settled down, but the disagreement was not permanently resolved. While some Muslims were reportedly content with the Patriarchate's intervention, Orthodox residents felt restrained rather than included. The **government was later criticized** for not protecting religious freedom and instead transferring part of its mandate to the Church. Later in 2013, a dispute broke out in the village of Chela (Samtskhe-Javakheti region) around a newly built minaret. After protests from the Orthodox community, the local government reportedly found fault with the minaret's customs clearance and took the minaret down, only to restore it a few weeks later. The re-installment sparked new protests showing the **authorities' ignorance and naivety** in handling the dispute purely on an administrative level. Five kilometers north of Chela, a dispute escalated in Mokhe in 2014. The Muslim community protested against the conversion of a historical mosque owned by the municipality into a culture house. Two more incidents happened in Batumi in 2013 and in Kobuleti in 2014 (both in Adjara). The mosque in Batumi had become too small. The dispute was triggered by rumors that the Muslim community wanted to rebuild a destroyed Ottoman mosque which reminds the population of Turkey's seizure of Batumi in 1921. In Kobuleti, local Orthodox residents opposed the construction of a Muslim madrasa (supposedly supported by Turkey) due to **fears of growing Muslim and Turkish power** in the region. Neither legal objections nor street barricades could stop the construction of the school. Later, a pig's head was nailed to its door. The authorities intervened in a timely manner, but the perpetrators were only prosecuted under administrative charges.

dents took place in mixed, but predominantly Orthodox villages (see map). The underlying dynamics of the disputes were diverse. Alongside the difficult economic and security conditions, high unemployment rates as well as weak state delivery and justice structures have likely contributed to the atmosphere that gave rise to the series of incidents between Orthodox and Muslim communities. Also, the rapid modernization policy of the government, which failed to include the Church and more conservative currents of society,

brought further frictions to the socio-political arena. A few GOC priests have made statements that were contradictory to ideas of tolerance and peaceful cohabitation, and some have even employed hate speech against Muslims.

The incidents were further influenced by the narrow understanding of who is Georgian, supported by nationalist identity politics and changing demographics in Kvemo-Kartli and Samtshe-Javakheti. Since the 1980s, the government has resettled thousands of environmental migrants from Adjara and Svaneti to these two regions. The livelihoods of these mountain populations had become endangered by the increasing number of landslides, floods, and avalanches due to climate change. Among the resettled people were many ethnic Georgian Sunni Muslims and ethnic Azeri Shi'ite Muslims. Today, the latter make up the biggest community in Kvemo-Kartli with roughly 45 per cent of the region's total population.

Another dynamic that has affected the development of the incidents is the history of territorial conflicts and breakaway regions that have made Georgia conflict-weary. Maybe this explains why local authorities are said to have employed a purely administrative approach to complaints against the minaret in Chela and the enlarging of the mosque in Batumi. However, by ignoring the emotional level of the disputes, they may have aggravated them or even partly created them.

Another underlying dynamic to the incidents are fears on the part of local Orthodox communities of renewed Turkish expansion, especially in the cases of Batumi and Kobuleti in Adjara, which borders Turkey. This fear seems to persist, even though the states of Georgia and Turkey often partner on an international level.

There is also a wider societal perception that new, culturally-different forms of Islam are taking root in Georgia. The "traditional" form of Islam in Georgia is a blend of either Sunni or Shi'ite Islam with Sufi or pagan elements. The new influence is exemplified by more conservative styles of wearing headscarves, or mosques built in a supposedly "Wahhabi" style (e.g., in the Pankisi Gorge, Gardabani, and Marneuli). Sometimes, these perceptions also refer to what is seen as growing Turkish influence. The Georgian Sunnis in Adjara and the Sunni Turks share some faith-based commonalities, which increases fears on the



community level that Turkey could reclaim Adjara one day.

Worries also exist on the community level that Adjaran Muslims, although most of them are ethnic Georgians, might feel closer ties to Turkey than to Georgia and thus copy Turkey's ambivalent policy and behavior towards the so-called Islamic State (IS). The danger of these perceptions is that they can get out of hand quickly and marginalize the voices of citizens of Georgia who want to speak out for peace and tolerance – and just happen to be of Islamic faith.

Influenced by the events in Syria and Iraq, concerns about increasing violent religious extremism are growing in Georgia. The US Department of State estimates that 50–100 people had left Georgia to join IS by the end of 2014. It is feared that examples such as that of Tarkhan Batirashvili could attract more young Muslims to fight for IS. Batirashvili, known by his nom de guerre Omar al-Shishani ("Omar the Chechen"), is an ethnic Kist from the Pankisi Gorge that borders on Chechnya. Moreover, the former sergeant in the Georgian Army is part of the leadership circle of IS today. Since the first Russian-Chechen war in the mid-1990s, many refugees have moved south into Georgia. Control of the valley became a contentious issue between Russia and Georgia, with Russia accusing Georgia of fostering violent extremism. After intensified domestic and international (Russian and US) pressure, Georgia introduced security and military measures to tighten its grip on the separatists and prevent the proliferation of terrorism from the valley.

Policies Addressing Minorities

The quest for a national identity intensified after independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The time since then can be divided into three periods. During the first period under President Zviad Gamsakhurdia (1991–1992), and to a lesser extent under Eduard Shevardnaze (1992/1995–2003), state policies were very nationalistic in keeping with the goal of strengthening the nation-state. Especially the slogan "Georgia for Georgians", which implies minorities should feel privileged that they may live on Georgian land, antagonized minority communities. They were perceived as threats to Georgian independence by some societal and political leaders. While Shevardnadze officially recognized the GOC by signing the Constitutional Agreement (informally named "Concordat"), all other denominations could only register as non-commercial organizations. Until today, the GOC receives heavy compensation for its sufferings during Soviet times, while Muslim, Armenian-Apostolic, Catholic, and Jewish denominations have only been compensated since 2014 and on a much more modest scale.

The second period begins with Mikhail Saakashvili (2004–2013) modernizing the country after the Rose Revolution. He introduced state policies promoting equality, tolerance, and the protection of minorities. The Council of National Minorities under the Public Defender's Office and the Civil Integration and Tolerance Council were both founded in 2005. While being tolerant on a cultural level, he used coercive means to silence opposition groups and ideas that he disagreed with. This included

more conservative currents in society, such as the GOC, whose support Saakashvili may have lost due to his high-speed modernization program of the country.

The third and current period, marked by the presidency of Giorgi Margvelashvili (since 2013) and the parliamentary coalition “Georgian Dream”, is characterized by a will to address minority issues (as the anti-discrimination law of May 2014 exemplifies) and more tolerance towards political dissent. Examples of this are the recently renamed State Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality (“Civic Equality” refers to the minority communities); the National Concept on Tolerance and Civil Integration, which the ministry has used to carry out different activities ranging from multi-ethnic cultural and music festivals to civil awareness-raising and tolerance campaigns; and the creation of the inter-agency committee for religious issues in 2014. Formerly sidelined groups naturally mobilized around their past grievances and re-emerged in the public arena. This included the GOC, which wanted to reassert its powers vis-à-vis the government by mobilizing its followers against the anti-discrimination law. The disputes since 2012 can thus be understood as a response to Saakashvili’s top-down enforced tolerance policies.

Strategies for the Future

Concrete steps towards peaceful coexistence in Georgia have been taken. Free translation services at court houses, teaching of multiple languages at schools, and recognition of diplomas from minority regions are active steps towards facilitating

access to justice or education for minority communities. However, the implementation of further existing policies aimed at peaceful coexistence will take much more efforts. In future efforts to promote peaceful coexistence, the Georgian government could strengthen its approach in two ways: *First*, promoting an identity discourse recognizing minority groups as full *citizens of Georgia*. An inclusive and participatory societal process avoiding culturally or historically biased terminology could lead the way. The creation of a more diverse history, joint national figures, and common myths

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could help, too. Such efforts may help to promote the inclusion and participation of minorities in the political process by reassuring them that there is a safe space for minority group citizens to express their views, which may be different from the Georgian mainstream, without being labeled radical or otherwise suspect.

Second, focusing on local solutions. Strengthening local governance and introducing more federalist elements may support local arenas for political debate as well as local solutions to disputes related to peaceful coexistence. Disputes are more likely to find a non-violent settlement when they aren’t lifted to a national level, where discriminatory discourses can get out of hand quickly. This requires media

training to counter hate-speech and one-sided reporting. When local actors are allowed and empowered to find one-time creative options, they are more likely to produce feasible avenues than if it is understood that they set the standard model for future disputes.

Switzerland is currently engaged in strengthening political inclusion of ethnic minorities in the south of Georgia, fostering local and regional development as well as supporting women’s political participation across ethnic backgrounds. While Switzerland is already committed to the broader topics that may have an effect on improved majority-minority relations, support for more local solutions could be worthwhile for Switzerland to assess. Do local dispute resolution mechanisms exist, and how do they function? Could Switzerland, with its mediation support expertise, play a role in assisting community mediation structures? Partnerships could also be explored with institutions like the Ombudsman’s office or the Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, to engage in joint learning. As well as supporting peaceful coexistence in Georgia, maybe Switzerland can also learn lessons from Georgian experiences that will be relevant back home.

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