

Islam and Tolerance

in Wider Europe



Islam and Tolerance in Wider Europe

Edited by Pamela Kilpadi

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p a r t t w o

Ethnic Relations in the Caucasus

Conflict in Georgia: Religion and Ethnicity

Archil Gegeshidze

Pages 62–69
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Conflict in Georgia: Religion and Ethnicity

Archil Gegeshidze

Georgia's peaceful Rose Revolution in 2003 displaced former President Eduard Shevardnadze. During the popular revolution, supporters of current President Mihail Saakashvili marched on parliament carrying roses as a symbol of nonviolence

▪ Archil Gegeshidze

For over a decade Georgian authorities have attempted to characterize Georgia as a nation of extraordinary religious tolerance—a notion most vividly evidenced by Maidani, a patch of land in downtown Tbilisi where a Georgian Orthodox church stands nobly beside an Armenian Apostolic church, a synagogue and a mosque—a scene not uncommon elsewhere in the country. Nevertheless, Georgian modern history is riddled with ethnic conflict fueled by religious differences. Skeptics challenge the government's assertion of a tolerant Georgia as a cynical, propagandistic trick of a central government striving to mold international public opinion in its favor, while at times pursuing ultra-nationalistic policies that infringe upon religious freedom. This is at least partially true. After losing two tug-of-wars with Russia over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, one of Georgia's main policy objectives is to secure international support for the peaceful transfer of these territories back to Georgia. Furthermore, the country's recent quest for a new identity has given rise to several dangerous popular convictions.

Dangerous convictions of a new nation

Following the collapse of communist ideology and the Zviad Gamsakhurdia-led national independence movement, Georgia's identity crisis resulted in the emergence of two popular

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convictions that foreshadowed the course of modern events. First, the conviction that Georgia was in need of ‘ethnic purification’ because all recent non-Georgian or ‘foreign’ arrivals living on Georgian land are more loyal to imperial Russia than to Georgia.¹ Prior to the development of Georgian popular discourse promoting civil and human rights as well as the need to guarantee minority rights to self-determination, the ‘ethnic purification’ discourse launched Gamsakhurdia and his followers to power.

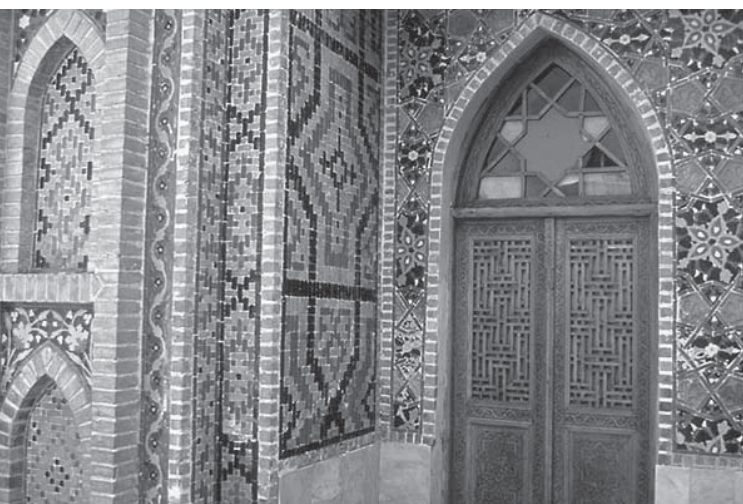
The second conviction nourished by nationalistic sentiments was the idea of Georgian Orthodoxy as the sole religion for ‘genuine Georgians.’ This outlook had much to do with the important role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in uniting the country in critical times throughout the nation’s history. Although Georgians were not altogether ready to immediately flock back to the bosom of the Church after long years of infidelity under the Soviet system, the ‘masses’ tended to perceive conversion from sinners into believers as the sign and spirit of the times. Being religious, not to mention emulating popular new leaders, had become fashionable.²

The ‘ethnic purification’ and ‘genuine Georgian Orthodox’ convictions quickly gained popularity. Not surprisingly, in due course both convictions had a significant impact on Georgian policy design, most often with negative consequences.

From ethnic nationalism to ethnic conflict

The official ideology of ethnic nationalism resulted almost immediately in the adoption of policies hostile toward ethnic minorities, most notably the titular ethnic groups in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Local separatists and their Russian patrons added fuel to the fire in their efforts to pursue goals predetermined by both history and geopolitics.³ The first serious confrontation took place in South Ossetia. In January 1991 several thousand Georgian troops entered Tskhinvali, an administrative center of South Ossetia, marking the beginning of a year of chaos with sporadic Russian involvement and an escalation into urban warfare. One year later an agreement was reached between the parties bringing about a ceasefire, but the war’s consequences were devastating: some 1,000 dead, 100 missing, extensive destruction of homes and infrastructure,⁴ and around 30,000 refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).⁵

In the meantime, Gamsakhurdia was overthrown by a civil war within Georgia and the former Foreign Minister of the USSR, Eduard Shevardnadze, was invited back from Moscow to stabilize the situation. Nevertheless little progress has been made since 1992 to bring Ossetians and Georgians closer together. Current Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili’s previous attempt in 2004 to break a twelve-year deadlock and take another step to restore Georgia’s territorial integrity by undermining the regime in Tskhinvali was misguided,⁶ ignoring the fact that only a comprehensive approach to conflict resolution will result in a sustainable peace. Later the approach has changed. Georgia has devised a peace plan implying a three-stage strategy of conflict settlement.⁷ The onus is on Georgia, with help from its international partners, to increase the security and confidence of people living in conflict zone, promote economic rehabilitation and development, ensure the right of Ossetians to return to South Ossetia and Georgia proper, and create arrangements guaranteeing South Ossetia’s effective autonomy.⁸



One of the lovely mosques in old Tbilisi of the Muslim Azeri community, which number several thousand

Unfortunately the conflict in Abkhazia is comparably more deep-rooted and has had significantly more devastating results both in terms of Georgian nation-building and inter-ethnic relations between Georgians and Abkhaz. During the Russian-backed war in 1992–1993, the Abkhaz defeated the Georgian forces. About 300,000 people lost their homes and the seemingly intractable resentment,

grievances and ambitions sparked by the war remain tough obstacles to peace, not to mention the absence of any clear plan for conflict resolution. Unless underlying grievances are addressed, efforts to re-integrate Abkhazia into Georgia are almost certain to lead to violence. Over the past decade inconsistent policies have led to even greater divisions between Abkhaz and Georgians, so that the political positions taken by both sides have diverged radically when compared to their positions immediately following the cessation of hostilities in 1993.⁹

Also viewed as a powder keg of potential violence is Javakheti, a region in southern Georgia populated by Armenians and characterized by widespread poverty and social insecurity, high levels of corruption and organized crime, large-scale illegal storage and possession of firearms, and weak state capacity to address security concerns. In the early 1990s, demonstrations organized by Armenian nationalist organizations calling for secession were not supported by the majority of Javakheti's population.¹⁰ The situation has worsened since 1999, marked by public protests over deteriorating economic conditions, irregular electricity supplies, and growing speculation over the withdrawal of the local Russian military base.¹¹ Although the central government is currently in control of the situation, the potential for conflict is real.¹²

Over time, however, radical nationalistic attitudes have given way to more liberal views. Georgia's Rose Revolution in 2003 has brought to power political forces that are increasingly aware that only peaceful means will succeed in resolving ethnic differences, and high popular support enables the incumbent authorities to effectively advocate for seeking peaceful political solutions and suppressing ultra-nationalistic sentiments in Georgian society.

Taming religious extremism

Despite general tolerance toward minority religious groups, some Georgians are suspicious of Protestants and the followers of other 'nontraditional' religions and believe that they

take advantage of the population's economic hardship by providing economic assistance in exchange for conversion. They argue that foreign Christian missionaries should confine their activities to non-Christian areas, and at times their attempts to 'protect' the country's Church and cultural values turned aggressive in the late 1990s, with hate speech and violent attacks by organized groups of Orthodox Christian vigilantes directed at the members of religious groups including Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Evangelists, Pentecostals, and Hare Krishnas. The authorities failed to respond adequately and at times even cooperated in the attacks, which consequently became more frequent and pervasive, spreading from Tbilisi to many other regions throughout Georgia. The hate speech and attacks faded prior to the November 2003 elections, leading to speculation about how closely the government was controlling the violence. In 2004, there were scattered reports of intimidation and violence against religious minorities, but it was clear that the number of incidents had declined dramatically when compared with previous years.

Georgia's current President, National Security Council Secretary, and Government Ombudsman have effectively advocated for religious freedom and made numerous public speeches and appearances in support of minority religious groups. The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Procuracy have also become more active in the protection of religious freedom by pursuing criminal cases against Orthodox extremists who have continued to attack religious minorities.

Nevertheless, the problem of both verbal and physical harassment of the non-traditional minority religious groups remains, while the Georgian Orthodox Church continues to retain its status as the only religious institution with legal status in Georgia.¹³ Numerous parliamentarians objected strongly to a report by the ombudsman calling for equal recognition under the law for all religions. The MPs stated that the historical position of the Georgian Orthodox Church justified its privileged position. In the meantime, the Government passed a law enabling religious groups to register, but the unregistered religious groups still are not officially permitted to rent office space, acquire construction rights, import literature, or represent the international church. Furthermore, the Roman Catholic Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church have been unable to secure the return of churches closed or given to the Georgian Orthodox Church during the Soviet period.

The Ministry of Education now requires all fourth grade students to take a "Religion and Culture" class intended to cover the history of major religions. According to many parents, however, teachers of the class focus solely on the Georgian Orthodox Church, which is hardly surprising considering that the Church has gained a consultative role in all curriculum development.¹⁴

The above-mentioned cases of religious intolerance should not be viewed as proof of wide-scale Georgian xenophobia or religious nationalism, but more accurately a desperate attempt by the Georgian Orthodox Church to prevail over increasingly influential nontraditional religious denominations.

What next?

Georgia currently finds itself in a unique and critically important moment in its history, when the post-revolutionary political landscape presents a window of opportunity for building a viable democracy and a new state based upon the rule of law. The fate of the new regime will depend upon its ability to upgrade standards for the respect of human rights and ease ethnic tensions—challenges so all-encompassing and profound that they will be

Georgia and its Muslims

by Fariz Ismailzade

Georgia's ongoing separatist conflicts are not overtly religious, but the activities of local Muslim communities are often at the center of Tbilisi's discussions on security issues. The leaderships of both separatist regions—Abkhazia and South Ossetia—profess largely Christian Orthodoxy like the majority of Georgians, although the population of Abkhazia is primarily Muslim. The recent political unification of the country's Muslims from various ethnic groups, however, is interpreted by some as a move toward increased self-determination and possibly independence.

Past relations

The majority Christian and Muslim minority populations in Georgia have enjoyed centuries of peaceful coexistence and cooperation in resisting foreign invasions. Since Georgia regained its independence in 1991, however, relations between Christians and Muslims have often been problematic, especially as regards the Turk-Meshetins (Akhiska Turks) deported in the 1940s by Stalin to Central Asia who are currently striving to return to their historic homeland. Despite the fact that the repatriation of Turk-Meshetins was a Council of Europe requirement for Georgia's membership in 1999, Georgian authorities are not aiding and at times hindering this return.

Another Muslim group often seen as posing a threat to Georgian stability and national security is the Chechens settled in the Pankisi Gorge. This group hosted rebels from Chechnya and sparked Russian-Georgian bilateral hostilities in the late 1990s, when the Kremlin began accusing official Tbilisi of assisting Chechen rebels and hiding them in the Gorge and even threatened military intervention if adequate measures were not taken to address the situation. Indeed, due to its links with Chechnya, Pankisi Gorge has become a hotspot for the smuggling of weapons and other illegal goods. Finally, in 1999-2000 former Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze, eager to stave off Russian invasion and prove to the international community that an independent Tbilisi is capable of controlling its own territory and effectively fighting crime, ordered the army to step in and clean up illegal activities.

Secessionist tendencies among Georgia's Muslim Abkhaz and Ajarian minorities caused the most headaches for Georgia throughout the 1990s. With Russia's help, the Abkhaz have been more successful in their anti-Tbilisi drive, effectively expelling Georgian residents as well as the federal army from Abkhazia in early 1990s and establishing a de-facto independent state. Abkhazia remains the number one security problem for Georgian authorities. Ajaria has not officially declared independence, but during the presidency of Ajarian leader Aslan Abashidze, the territory successfully avoided subordination to the central government. Ajaria's autonomous status was abolished soon after Aslan Abashidze was overthrown in 2004, and Georgia's new political leadership has managed to quell "disobedient" Ajaria.

Meanwhile, Georgia's Muslim Azerbaijanis, who initiated the country's new Muslim Democratic Party, are showing an increasingly frustrated attitude toward Georgian authorities

as well as internal strife within their communities, and may prove the largest threat to Georgian stability in the near future. These 600,000 or so ethnic Azerbaijanis live in a compact area in Kvemo-Kartli on the border with Azerbaijan and represent the country's largest ethnic minority. Land privatization is the top priority on the list of policy problems for ethnic Azerbaijanis in Georgia. Land has been neither distributed nor privatized among Azerbaijanis, so they are forced to rent it from ethnic Georgians (or use it with their permission). As a result, ethnic Azerbaijanis believe they are being discriminated against by the government and stage sporadic protests, with several such protests resulting in the death last year of Azerbaijani villagers at the hands of Georgian landowners.

Former President Eduard Shevardnadze's administration did little to address these issues. Nevertheless, ethnic Azerbaijanis chose not to rebel or seek separation from Georgia and, along with their kin in Azerbaijan, they had high expectations that following the Rose Revolution in 2003 the new, more democratic Georgian leadership would solve the Azerbaijani land problem. These hopes were soon dashed when the new administration neglected the land privatization issue and did not place the problems of ethnic minorities high on their political agenda. At the same time, the new regime's fight against corruption, cross-border smuggling and tax evasion has effectively led to what Azerbaijanis perceive as a discriminatory crackdown against Azerbaijanis, with dozens of ethnic Azerbaijani businessmen arrested in 2004. To make matters worse, Azerbaijanis in Georgia traditionally earn profits from agriculture, and the tightened border regulations hinder them from trading and selling their products in Azerbaijan.

These tensions, aggravated by the high unemployment rate among ethnic Azerbaijanis in Georgia, have turned this region into a powder-keg for potential conflict, with spontaneous protests a common occurrence.

Current context

On June 20, 2006, the National Assembly of the Azerbaijanis of Georgia invited representatives of Georgia's Muslim minorities to the Turkish city of Erzurum to discuss the establishment of a political party in Georgia. The conference was attended by 80 delegates consisting of ethnic Azerbaijanis, Muslim Ossetians, Chechens (Kistins), Ingush, Turk-Mesheti, Adjar, Abkhaz and Muslim Georgians. As a result of the discussions, a working group was established which will prepare the founding congress of the Muslim Democratic Party of Georgia. According to the final declaration of the conference, the Party will respect the "peace and territorial integrity of Georgia" (the statement was not signed by the Abkhaz delegation).

Both Turkey and Azerbaijan remain major players in Georgia's domestic politics, but both countries would rather encourage Georgian stability and economic cooperation—aims that serve the interests of Georgia's Muslims. Given this international political backdrop, instability involving Muslim minorities in Georgia in the near future is likely to focus on issues of economic discontent vented in the form of small, sporadic protests.

The role of Russia in Georgia's minority relations should not be underestimated given its traditional practice of precipitating unrest among ethnic minorities to exert pressure over former Soviet Republics. If Moscow wishes to see the current leadership in Tbilisi weakened, provoking clashes involving Muslim minorities or Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Georgia may succeed in destabilizing the country, especially if Russia chooses to completely withdraw its military base from the Armenian-populated town of Akhalkalaki.

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difficult to successfully address without the energetic cooperation of the international community.

Specifically, in striving to ease regional tensions and end ethnic conflict in Georgia, the international community should heed the following lessons learned:

- The lack of coordination between international actors (both international organizations and individual governments) prevents an effective utilization of diplomatic as well as financial resources;
- Multilateral efforts aimed at the political settlement of conflicts, such as the UN Security Council or Friends of the Secretary General on Abkhazia/Georgia, proved to be ineffective due to Russia's veto power; and
- Limited mandates and/or a lack of motivation has meant that United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia and CIS-led Peacekeeping Operations have not brought tangible results.

Policy recommendations for both international actors and Georgia's government:

- Questions of Georgia's accession to the EU and NATO should not undermine cooperation with Russia. Further international pressure via EU-Russia and/or US-Russia dialogue could move Russia toward more constructive bilateral participation in conflict resolution;
- Importantly, the European Union can encourage constructive dialogue toward a settlement by cultivating western liberal values and engaging in conflict mediation with Georgia and Russia;
- Wide-ranging debate on the relationship between citizenship, nationalism and ethnic identity should be encouraged in all areas. Meanwhile minorities, including nontraditional religious groups, should be considered in all assistance programs;
- Last but not least, the needs of those most affected by conflict—often the poorest sectors of society—must be addressed and their voices and well-being should be strengthened through programs designed to boost personal security, civil society, micro-finance, and the leadership of women.



Georgian and Russian churches on the banks of the Kura River, built primarily during the last century. Most incidents of religious intolerance in Georgia are fueled by desperate attempts of the Georgian Orthodox Church to prevail over increasingly influential nontraditional religious denominations.

Notes

- ¹ Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, Indiana University Press, 1994, pp.324–5.
- ² Ivlian Khaindrava, *Church in Modern Georgia*, Central Asia and Caucasus, Vol. 5(29), 2003, p.27 (in Russian)
- ³ For example, prior to the parliamentary elections in 1990 on September 20, the local leadership of South Ossetia initiated a proclamation of full sovereignty within the USSR. Gamsakhurdia's government responded fiercely and abolished the autonomous oblast status of South Ossetia on December 11, 1990. Soon afterward, the direct military confrontation erupted.
- ⁴ International Crisis Group, *Georgia: Avoiding War in South Ossetia*, Europe Report #159, Tbilisi-Brussels, 2004, pp.3–4.
- ⁵ Pryakhin, Vladimir. *Political-Geographic Quadrangle "Tbilisi-Tskhinvali-Vladikavkaz-Moscow": Prospects for Resolution of Georgian -Ossetian Conflict*, Central Asia and Caucasus, Vol. 5 (29), 2003, p.58 (in Russian)
- ⁶ The Georgian approach failed in large part because it was based on a limited analysis of the causes of the conflict. It falsely considered that South Ossetia's de facto president, Eduard Kokoity, had little democratic legitimacy or popular support and that the people would rapidly switch loyalties from Tskhinvali to Tbilisi. The Russian factor was also underestimated, as it was naively believed that Russia would not resist Georgia's attempts to change the *status quo*.
- ⁷ The peace plan was developed on the basis of President Saakashvili's initiative made public at the January 26, 2005 Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Later, the Plan was supported by the OSCE, EU, U.S. government, etc.
- ⁸ International Crisis Group, *Georgia: Avoiding War in South Ossetia*, Europe Report No.159, Tbilisi-Brussels, 2004, pp.3–4.
- ⁹ At that time the Abkhaz side willingly negotiated the federal status within Georgia, although there have been various readings of this notion. Currently, the Abkhaz side persistently opposes any effort to include the status issue in negotiations and insists on full independence.
- ¹⁰ Antonenko, O. *Assessment of the Potential Implications of Akhalkalaki Base Closure for the Stability in Southern Georgia—EU Response Capacities*, CPN Briefing Study, September 2001.
- ¹¹ Javakheti currently hosts one of the largest Russian military bases on Georgian territory. Its closure has already been negotiated with Russia. The military base has been providing significant economic benefits to the residents of Javakheti, including employment, purchases of local agricultural products, assistance with the transit of local goods to Russia and Armenia, illegal economic activity that benefits local political elites, etc. Moreover, due to historical factors, the local Armenian population associates its security guarantees vis-à-vis neighboring Turkey not with the Georgian state, but with the Russian armed forces present on the ground. The region regularly sees hundreds of local residents rallying in protest of the withdrawal of the military base.
- ¹² Gegeshidze, Archil. *Georgia's Regional Vulnerabilities and the Ajaria Crisis*, Insight Turkey, Vol. 6, No. 2.
- ¹³ *Georgia—International Religious Freedom Report 2005*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, 2006.
- ¹⁴ *Georgia—Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2005*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State, March 8, 2006.

Islam and Tolerance in Wider Europe offers a refreshing new look at the complex interplay between religion, nationalism and expansionism in an increasingly globalized world, as revealed by a new generation of open society leaders working to build a more tolerant Europe. The authors are fellows and colleagues of the International Policy Fellowships program—an initiative of the Open Society Institute that has attempted to combat ‘brain drain’ while developing policy research capacities, initially in emerging democracies of the former Soviet sphere where concepts such as ‘policy’ and ‘fellowship’ were virtually untranslatable. Since its establishment in the late 1990s, some 250 of its fellows have grown into a network of open society leaders spanning more than 40 countries on nearly every continent.

Each chapter—focusing on Western Europe, the Caucasus, Russia, Turkey, Central Europe, and the Balkans—includes several essays by different authors, all of whom are actively involved in the dynamic policymaking processes transforming their respective countries. Their policy perspectives benefit from a uniquely ‘inside out’ rather than the usual ‘outside in’ orientation found in most English-language information about their communities. Taken as a whole, the compilation offers insightful insider stories and comparisons across countries and regions. The results are illuminating.