CULTURAL DOMINATION AND THE SIGNS OF MINORITY CULTURE ERASURE IN KVEMO KARTLI REGION

Chapter 3. Cultural Domination and the Signs of Minority Culture Erasure in Kvemo Kartli Region

Introduction and Background

It is often noted in Georgia that ethnic and religious diversity forms the foundation of the country's dignity. It is also frequently declared with pride that representatives of various ethnic groups peacefully coexist in the country.

Georgia is indeed notable for its multi-ethnic composition in the region although its ethnic and religious make-up has often changed in response to various political and historical factors. In this regard, the most notable changes appeared since 1989.¹ For the sake of comparison, according to the 1989 general population census, ethnic minorities made up 30% of the country's total population, while according to the 2014 census – only 13.3% did. In accordance with the 2014 census data, Georgians account for 86.8% of the total population, Azerbaijanis – 6.3%, Armenians – 4.5%, Russians – 0.7%, Ossetians – 0.4%, Yazidis – 0.3%, Ukrainians – 0.2%, Kists – 0.2%, Greeks – 0.1%, Assyrians – 0.1%, and others – 0.4%. It should be noted that as per 1989 census, Azerbaijanis were the third largest ethnic minority in Georgia (5.7%) while today they are are on the first place among the minorities.² The majority of them are densely settled in Kvemo Kartli (41.75%), as well as Kakheti and Shida Kartli regions.³ In four regions of Kvemo Kartli – Marneuli, Dmanisi, Bolnisi and Gardabani – Azerbaijanis represent the absolute or relative majority.⁴

In Georgia, as well as in other countries, distinct ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups co-exist. It is the key task of a democratic state to ensure fair political, social, and cultural environment, as well as access to social and political life, for minorities by providing a suitable environment and equal opportunities. In multi-ethnic societies with a dominant culture it is crucial to facilitate preservation and development of non-dominant cultures, and to eradicate policies and practices that could contribute to their cultural marginalization.

In the human rights domain, there are several key directions when it comes to protecting ethnic minority rights in accordance with international and national obligations. One of them directly concerns protection and facilitation of ethnic identity and self-determination, which is important to "prevent forced assimilation and the loss of cultures, religions and languages." Article 11.2 of the Georgian Constitution suggests that "citizens of Georgia, regardless of their ethnic and religious affiliation or language, shall have the right to maintain and develop their culture, and use their mother tongue in private and in public, without discrimination." International obligations adopted by Georgia concerning national minority protection are also relevant. In 2005, Georgia ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM), committing itself to ensuring equal treatment of representatives of national minorities in all domains of economic, social, political, and cultural life, and providing the necessary conditions for them to develop their own culture and protect

¹ Caucasian House, "Religions in Georgia."

² "Ethnic groups in Georgia." Public Defender, Tolerance Centre. 2008.

³ http://csem.ge/interactivemap/.

⁴ "Ethnic groups in Georgia." Public Defender, Tolerance Centre. 2008.

⁵ http://ewmi-prolog.org/images/files/6310GEO WEB 1552474567.pdf.

⁶ Constitution of Georgia.

⁷ Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/1244853?publication=0.

their identity. Hence, realization of minority rights and protection of their linguistic and cultural identity are among the declared objectives.

One of the key features of full integration and engagement in public life is the implementation of effective policies aimed at the eradication of the language barrier. In cases when ethnic minorities are faced with challenges due to insufficient proficiency in the country's official language, the state has an obligation, both internationally and nationally, to provide information to national minorities in their own language. In accordance with Article 10.2 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM), "in areas inhabited by persons belonging to national minorities traditionally or in substantial numbers, if those persons so request and where such a request corresponds to a real need, the Parties shall endeavour to ensure, as far as possible, the conditions which would make it possible to use the minority language in relations between those persons and the administrative authorities." At the same time, the Law of Georgia on Official Language⁸ imposes the same obligation at the national level: "texts of statements, notifications, titles, posters, signboards, placards, advertisements, and other visual information intended to inform the public are prepared in the official language. If necessary, appropriate information may be indicated in a nonofficial language, and in those municipalities where representatives of national minorities are settled in communities, appropriate information may be indicated in the language of those national minorities as well."

The fact that the above need actually exists in certain municipalities has been demonstrated by a number of recent studies. In general, studies of the social and economic status of ethnic minority groups determined that ethnic minorities have higher unemployment and poverty rates, and lower education rates, compared to the general population. Insufficient knowledge of the official language is the most acute problem in the Azerbaijani community. Broadly speaking, insufficient knowledge of the Georgian language has been identified as the primary reason for the low level of civic and political activism among ethnic minorities.

It should also be emphasized that there is a tendency in Georgian society to seek explanation for the insufficient knowledge of the official language in the Azerbaijani community rather than in the defective education system. Previous studies¹⁰ have repeatedly shown that language-related challenges faced by the Azerbaijani community originate from significant flaws in the education program.

There are frequent instances when information is provided/received in Georgian in public spaces of the municipalities that are densely populated by the Azerbaijani ethnic minority (for instance, in Marneuli and Bolnisi municipalities). Necessary resources have not been allocated and appropriate steps have not been taken to rectify these shortcomings. Due to the lack of resources to translate information into the Azerbaijani language, representatives of the minority are isolated and excluded from public spaces and administrative proceedings. This is especially true of the older generation, who received education during the Soviet period and have not benefited from the "1+4" education program.

https://www.cciir.ge/images/pdf/CCIIR%20research%20document.pdf; 2) National Minorities and Education Reform in Georgia (ECMI), 2009. https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/106681/working_paper_46_geo.pdf; 3) Study of the Quota System at Higher Education Institutions in Georgia, Centre for Civil Integration and Inter-Ethnic Relations (CCIIR), 2013. https://cciir.ge/images/pdf/kvotireba.pdf.

⁸ Law of Georgia on Official Language. https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/2931198?publication=3.

⁹ Caucasus Barometer 2017 (Cited from Open Society Report, 2019, 87).

¹⁰ 1) Center for Integration and Inter-ethnic Relations.

¹¹ EMC Appeals to Marneuli Municipality to Create Resources for Translations in the Minority Language. https://emc.org.ge/ka/products/emc-marneulis-merias-da-sakrebulos-azerbaijanul-enaze-targmanis-resursebis-ararsebobis-gamo-sasamartloshi-uchivis; General Document Assessing the Existing Problems and Challenges in Bolnisi Municipality. https://emc.org.ge/ka/products/bolnisis-munitsipalitetshi-arsebuli-problemebis-da-gamotsvevebis-shefasebis-zogadi-dokumenti.

The 2019 monitoring report, published by the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM)¹², also reveals that the Georgian language is dominant in areas densely populated by ethnic minorities. The report, which assesses the implementation of the requirements outlined by the Framework Convention in Georgia, identified several problem areas, including the dominance of the Georgian language in all areas of the public domain. The document also emphasizes that "the necessary complementary efforts on promoting the use of minority languages in relation with the administration and teaching and learning in and of those languages are below the standards required by the Framework Convention," including legal and health domains. Thus, despite the mentioned positive commitments adopted by the state, representatives of ethnic minorities still face significant challenges in everyday life due to the dominance of the Georgian language in all areas of public domain.

On the part of the state, unfortunately, neither the efforts made to protect the cultural identity of ethnic minorities nor the actual steps taken seem to be appropriate for emphasizing the country's cultural diversity. The 2019 report of the Public Defender also states that more cultural events need to be held and more attention should be paid to the protection and display of authentic cultural heritage.¹³

In the framework of this research, many instances of marginalization of the non-dominant culture in the Kvemo Kartli region have been identified. Moreover, these examples illustrate the discriminatory policies and practices that follow from the erasure and banishment of a non-dominant culture, which is in direct opposition to the positive obligations adopted by the state.¹⁴

When assessing the state policy in this regards, it is important to pay attention to the dispositions, perceptions, and attitudes of the community representatives. The steps taken by the state to ensure peaceful and equal coexistence and equal access to social benefits in a diverse environment should first and foremost have a positive impact on their daily lives and quality of life. In the framework of the present study, as a result of a qualitative research conducted in Kvemo Kartli, we studied the signs of cultural dominance in the region, aspects of the representation of the Azerbaijani culture, and the associated challenges.

Research Goal and Methodology

The **goal** of the present study is to examine the representation of Azerbaijani culture and identify signs of cultural domination in the Azerbaijani community of Kvemo Kartli.

The **main questions** of the study are: How is the local Azerbaijani culture represented in Kvemo Kartli? What are the current challenges in the community in terms of the representation of Azerbaijani culture? How do community members explain and relate to the problem of cultural representation? How important is the issue of cultural representation in the local Azerbaijani community?

To study these issues, we utilized the qualitative research method of in-depth interviewing. We conducted twenty-four in-depth interviews in the framework of the study, including three expert - , one group - , and nineteen face-to-face interviews with individuals of different ages and genders.

We utilized snowball sampling in the process of selection, taking into account the residence, age, and gender of the study participants. The target group included representatives of the Azerbaijani

 $^{{}^{12}\,}https://emc.org.ge/ka/products/erovnuli-umtsiresobebis-datsvis-shesakheb-evropuli-charcho-konventsiis-mrchevelta-komitetis-angarishi-sakartveloze.$

¹³ See detailed overview of specific issues associated with the display of Azerbaijani culture in the Findings section.

¹⁴ See FCNM, Article 5.1: "The Parties undertake to promote the conditions necessary for persons belonging to national minorities to maintain and develop their culture, and to preserve the essential elements of their identity, namely their religion, language, traditions and cultural heritage."

community from Marneuli, Algeti, Sadakhlo, a Kvemo Bolnisi village (Kapanakhchi), a village nearby Dmanisi (Zemo Orozmani), and Gardabani. Although the study is not representative, we wanted to equally represent the opinions of individuals from different age and gender groups. Nonetheless, ultimately, younger volunteers are more represented, especially among the women. Only one elderly woman participated in the group interview.

The fieldwork was carried out from May to July 2019. A research assistant/volunteer, who is a member of the Azerbaijani community in Kvemo Kartli, facilitated communication with the respondents and assisted with various aspects of the fieldwork.

Ongoing Processes in the Azerbaijani Community

The local community of Kvemo Kartli is quite critical and resistant towards practices of cultural erasure and marginalization, as well as attempts to implement assimilation policies, which is reflected in the ongoing processes and transformations in the community.

Increased community responsiveness was especially apparent when they filmed an alternative to the promotional video prepared by the Administration of State Representative in Kvemo Kartli. ¹⁵ The original video ¹⁶ represents the region homogeneously and does not accurately reflect the cultural and religious diversity of its population, which caused dissatisfaction in the community, prompting a more inclusive and fair alternative.

One of the study respondents offered an interesting explanation of this incident. In the opinion of the respondent, one can barely interpret the community's reaction as resistance as it was geared towards cultural protection and dodging the risks of assimilation: "We can differentiate between resisting something and protecting something. I think that our community, as well as other communities, including Kists and ethnic Armenians, are more protective than resistant... I think that ethnic groups defend, love, and take pride in their culture. It is not like I don't love Georgian culture and resist, that's not the case. The emphasis is on the community itself, they say that they love their culture and assimilation is impossible exactly because of that."

Another obvious example of self-organization and recent activity among the Azerbaijani community is the establishment of a youth initiative group, "Salam." According to Elnur Aliso, one of the founders of the platform, the aim of the initiative is to "organize non-dominant groups in defense of justice and equality, as well as to preserve cultural heritage, language, and identity. The goal is to defend community values by means of organizing and reinforcing non-dominant groups, creating and sharing knowledge, and preserving cultural heritage." Members of the initiative are civil activists who respond to important and acute issues facing the community. They voice issues and respond proactively. According to the members of the platform, there were many reasons for the establishment of the group, but one incident was especially decisive — in October 2019, a young teacher in the Kvemo Kartli village of Kalinino, Hamid Sadikof, reacted to the kidnapping of his nineteen year old student and confronted his co-villagers by condemning the practice. — Following the

¹⁵ "A Video Response to Kvemo Kartli Governor's Office Prepared with the Leadership of Martagi Asadov," Marneuli Radio. http://marneulifm.ge/ka/marneuli/article/14131-mirthagi-asadovis-khelmdzghvanelobith-qvemo-qarthlis-guberniis-sapasukho-videorgoli-momzadda.

¹⁶ Kvemo Kartli Promotional Video Only Features Christian Imagery, Netgazeti. http://netgazeti.ge/news/291333.

¹⁷ "Dominant Gaze." https://emc.org.ge/ka/products/dominanturi-mzera-azerbaijaneli-temi.

¹⁸ https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/30231929.html.

¹⁹ In response to the incident, locals "took Hamid to the village square by force and made him apologize to the elders. They recorded the teacher's apology and published it on the internet." https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/30231929.html.

incident, the youth initiative group "Salam" expressed its support for the teacher and distributed a video titled "You are not alone, Hamid!" in social media. There are some important highlights in the public address captured in the video: "Hello, we have come, we stand in front of you! We come to reveal the issues of our community and society! We come to fight against injustice! We come to protest against child marriage and bride kidnapping! We come to support our teachers, doctors, scientists, engineers! We come to protect our culture and history! Hamid, you are not alone! Do not condemn the teacher, come to us if you have issues! I am Hamid! We are Hamid!"

The "Salam" platform reveals unique instances of self-organization and community development, both in the center of Marneuli Municipality and in the periphery.

Civic activism and public life of religious leaders is also noteworthy. Civic activists are well aware of their status as citizens and their role in Georgian society. They are united by a desire to be integrated into the common political project. This is the first stage in the construction of a new type of nationalist project wherein the community ventures to become part of the common national project via self-organization. In the course of the study, respondents repeatedly emphasized the feeling of a shared homeland, and their self-identification with Georgia rather than Azerbaijan. Furthemore, they distanced themselves from Azerbaijan by stressing that it is a neighboring country.

Interest in their own identity, thorough study of historical sources, search and inspection of information and archival material about their origins and historical role in Georgia contribute to their mobilization and self-determination. They are consciously and quite carefully trying to fashion a new political image of unity/collectivity that is more inclusive. This collectivity includes not only ethnic Georgians, but also all other groups. Here, the voices of all citizens are heard equally. Cultural "othering" and lack of acceptance is a painful topic that civic activists and participants of this study often address. At the same time, they find it relevant to talk about the need to rethink the concepts of citizenship and Georgianness. In the words of one of the respondents, "If we are building a common country, a homeland, together, I, as a citizen, should also feel its ownership. Every citizen should have that feeling."

According to the same respondent, the Georgian Orthodox Church – one of the strongest actors in the Georgian reality, – plays a central role in facilitating an exclusive definition of citizenship: "In reality, the Orthodox Church [...], which runs the show, [dictates] the borders of Georgianness. The credit for the definition of Georgianness, in a negative sense, goes to the Church. That is because Georgia could, in my opinion, become a broader concept that I could also identify with, along with ethnic Armenians, Kists, Abkhazians, Ossetians. This would be an inclusive definition of Georgia associated not with ethnicity and nationality, but with with something else, with a political space." In the words of the respondent, unfortunately, there are no institutions that would challenge the prevailing definition of Georgianness and "therefore, ethnic Georgians, who are Muslims, stay outside of the category. A dissonant situation arises: yes, I am Georgian, but at the same time I am not."

Civic activists respond with pain to being perceived as "strangers," or as backward or uneducated in the dominant gaze. In one of her blogs²⁰, a civil activist, Samira Bairamova, talks about being an "other" in her own country. In her words, although she turned Georgian culture into her native culture and learned the language, she still has not become part of Georgian society and continues to be seen as the "other": "A real Georgian is a person who was born as Georgian and we will always remain "foreign" to one another in this small country."

-

 $^{^{20}\ \}underline{\text{https://publika.ge/blog/saqartvelo-dagvianebuli-samshoblo-me-rogorc-uckho/}$

Elnur Alisoi²¹ and Kamran Mamedov touch upon the topic of the dominant Georgian gaze. Kamran Mamedov distinguishes between four types of dominant gaze towards ethnic Azerbaijanis²²: 1) Not seeing; 2) Seeing as a threat; 3) Seeing as backward; 4) Seeing through the lens of Azerbaijan. In an earlier blog post²³, Mamedov discussed the "domestication" of the Azerbaijani community and the problem of internalizing the sentiment.

Researchers believe²⁴ that active engagement of the younger generation may be a social effect of the reformed education policy: "The most important social factor is the emergence of a young generation with distinct political consciousness and social culture in response to the education policy reforms implemented in the 2010s. Young people receive education at Georgian universities and, unlike their parents, can communicate in Georgian. Among the representatives of this generation, identification with Georgian politics and the idea of the Georgian state has sharply increased." In the view of these researchers, the ongoing radical transformation in the Azerbaijani community, especially among the youth, represents a new process of identifying and constructing an identity that requires proper assessment in academic and political circles, and inclusion in the process of integration.

Overall, according to a study participant, the current communal resistance can be explained as a reaction to the hegemony of the domiant culture, which necessitates protecting one's culture from marginalization and discrimination. The mentioned issues and affects reveal a lack of equal political and social rights, and a deep dissatisfaction that stands behind it.

National Policy and Ethnicity in Georgia

In Georgia, national policies, approaches to ethnic minority issues, ethnic nationalism, and the perception of certain nations and ethnic cultures as either "developed" or "backward" are in part an outcome of the Soviet nationalities policy and the established norms of national organization. The Soviet government promoted four forms of national self-expression: "national territory, language, elite, and culture. With the establishment of these four forms in a particular geographic area, the language of the titular autochthonous nation was declared as the state language. Only a few nations were considered culturally developed, including Russians, Ukrainians, Georgians, Armenians, Jews, and Germans, which were united in a common category of "Western nations"." Even earlier, from the second half of the nineteenth century, race and religion were considered as the main criteria in the classification of Caucasian peoples and languages by Russian ethnographers, geographers, and missionaries. According to Broers, as much as Russian ethnographers preferred Indo-Europeans, the race factor acted against Georgians. "However, religion and social structure (feudalism) were a compensatory factor, which is why Georgians did not fall into the category of "foreigners" (инородцы), which was a derogatory term used against Muslims and non-Christian groups" (Вroers 2009).

In the Soviet era, "not all nations were quantitatively equal: there were small and large [...] nations. Not all nations were equal in terms of their development either: there were "backward" and "civilized"

²¹ Elnur Alisoi, "Dominant Gaze – Azerbaijani Community."

²² Dominant Gaze on the Azerbaijani Community of Georgia. https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge.

 $^{^{23}} https://jomberli.wordpress.com/2015/01/06/\%E1\%83\%92\%E1\%83\%90\%E1\%83\%AA\%E1\%83\%AE\%E1\%83\%95\%E1\%83\%90\%E1\%83\%A0\%E1\%83\%9D\%E1\%83\%A1\%E1\%83\%9C\%E1\%83\%94\%E1\%83\%91\%E1\%83%A3\%E1\%83\%9A\%E1\%83\%94\%E1%83\%94\%E1\%83\%94\%E1\%83\%94\%E1\%83\%98/.$

²⁴ Zviadadze and Jishkariani, 2018, "The Problem of Identity among the Azerbaijanis of Kvemo Kartli and its Political and Social Dimensions.

²⁵ Zviadadze and Jishkariani, 2019.

²⁶ Laurence Broerce, 2009. "'David and Goliath' and 'Georgians in the Kremlin': A Post-Colonial Perspective on Conflict in Post-Soviet Georgia."

nations. Not all nations were equal in economic terms: some of them were "oppressive" and others were "oppressed"."²⁷ As for the definition of a nation, for example, Stalin wrote that "a nation is a historically formed, stable entity that is built on shared language, territory, economic life, and psychological disposition as revealed in cultural unity." Slezkine notes that by the beginning of World War I, such a definition of a nation was more or less acceptable and that Stalin's description was not controversial. Before the revolution, Russia delineated nationalisms, nationalist parties, and national "issues," yet it did not have an official position regarding the meaning of "nationalism." During the February Revolution, national identity was largely linked to religious beliefs, namely Orthodox Christianity: "certain non-Orthodox groups were identified as "foreigners" (μηοροθμω) — etymologically this concept implied genetic differences ("non-local," "non-native"), but it was usually interpreted as "non-Christian" or "backward." These two concepts reflected Moscow's ("premodern") and Peter's ("modern") understanding of the *other*, and were used interchangeably. "Foreigners" were classified according to their religion or "lifestyle," which in turn was understood in terms of the degree of development ("native," "nomadic," "wanderer")."²⁸

Hence, the perception of "Muslims" in Georgia as non-Christian "others," where the "other" is perceived as backward and less civilized, derives from the existing approaches to ethnic minorities (official, popular, or academic) and past practices. Discriminatory policies and practices were particularly severe and painful for the Azerbaijani community in the 1990s, as revealed in the interviews with respondents.

Regarding the approaches to ethnic diversity in Georgia, Broers suggests that the institutional and ideological frameworks that Georgia inherited from the Soviet Union have determined the parameters of ethnic identity.²⁹ The legacy he is referring to implies that according to the expectations of post-Soviet citizens, the state is not ethnically neutral. In contrast, the titular majority expects the state to protect the interests of the titular nation, while the minorities view the majority-dominated state with suspicion, as an oppressive machine.

Broers identifies several approaches to understanding ethnic diversity in Georgia. According to him, the political elite in post-conflict Georgia faced several imperatives: on the one hand, the institutional and discursive framework demanded the return of the lost territories, and on the other hand, pressure from the outside pushed for the formation of a "civil" state and the avoidance of any forms of radicalization. Simultaneously, the agenda for building a state had to be in line with the expectations of the majority, which demanded an emphasis the interests and symbols of ethnic Georgia. In other words, the state had to cater to a diverse audience: the international community that expected a tolerant civic policy, the separatist regimes of Sukhumi and Tskhinvali, the non-Georgian population of the country, and the Georgian population. In these circumstances, according to Broers, Georgia essentially chose, albeit only formally, a declarative policy of inclusion that is in line with international norms. In reality, however, this was a solution for a country that neither the strategy nor the resources to pursue a consistent national policy.

As for the approaches to ethnic issues in the academic domain, Broers contends that the majority of arguments are primordialist and skeptical of Western "constructivist" approaches: "Primordialism in Georgia is closely linked to the category of autochthony, which was bolstered in the Soviet Union and is the basis for granting a titular status to a specific group in a specific area." Doctrines regarding various forms of autochthony are a major component of academic approaches built on prehistoric ethnography. Broers suggests that the main outcome of the doctrine of autochthony is that all other

²⁷ Slezkine.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Broers, L. 2008. "Filling the Void: Ethnic Politics and Nationalities Policy in Post-Conflict Georgia. *Nationalities Papers* 36 (2): 275–304.

groups are perceived as "immigrants," which means that their homeland is somewhere else and hence, they have no political rights in Georgia.

When discussing Georgian nationalism, Stephen Jones also argues³⁰ that Georgia is not an ethnoneutral state and that "Constitutional superiority of the Georgian church, the lack of a desire to create a better law for the protection of national minorities, and the practice of insulting political opponents on the grounds of their ethnic origin (Saakashvili was condemned for being Armenian), testifies to the ethnocultural essence of Georgian national identity." Jones, like Broers, adds that Georgian elites have been forced to incorporate international norms for the protection of minority rights into the domestic law because of their aspirations towards the European Union.

The study respondents also talk about the superficial approach in the implementation of various "integration" policies. In their view, the state only implements certain programs to "pay its dues to international organizations," which is reflected in the quality of these programs. Being perceived as outsiders in the process of state-building contributes to the feeling of alienation in minority communities. As mentioned above, the respondents have an issue with the narrow understanding of *Georgianness* and *Georgian citizenship* and believe that it is crucial to reconsider these estbalished concepts.

In Eric Hobsbawm's formulation, the nation is a double phenomenon formed from the "above" yet impossible to understand without analyzing the assumptions, hopes, needs, aspirations, and interests of ordinary people who are not charged with the idea of national belonging.³¹ It is necessary to replace the essentialist understanding of a nation as a naturally given phenomenon with a modernist understanding, which will enable the inclusion of ethnic minorities in the state-building process and promote the belief that ethnic minorities represent an indivisible part of Georgian society.

Properties of "Cultural Difference" and "Othering"

In the social sciences, ethnicity is seen as a complex phenomenon and an ethnic group is defined as a minority group that culturally differs from the majority. There is an inherent paradox in this differentiation since "the more two groups resemble each other, the more they emphasize their differences." Furthermore, differences between ethnic groups become apparent only in the process of co-existence rather than in isolation. Various criteria are utilized to mark cultural differences, including language, religion, phenotype, etc. However, we are interested in the approach that emphasizes social characteristics and inter-group boundaries rather than "cultural characteristics" of a given ethnicity. The mentioned model of ethnicity was developed by Frederic Bart, who argues that "ethnicity should be viewed as an aspect of a relationship or a social process and not as an "object," a property of an individual or a group." Based on this model, cultural differences are part of a dynamic social process.

For the present study, it is interesting to conceptualize terms like "strange" and "other" with regard to the processes that produce "strangers" and "others" in a multi-ethnic society, and the role these constructs play in maintaining and strengthening cultural dominance.

Iris Marion Young³³ writes: "to experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at the

³⁰ Stephen Jones. *Georgia: A Political History Since Independence.*

³¹ Eric Hobsbawm. *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*, 19.

³² Fredrik Barth. 1969. Cited from Erickson 2017.

³³ Iris Marion Young. 2005. Five Faces of Oppression.

same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as the Other. Cultural imperialism involves the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm. [...] The dominant group reinforces its position by bringing the other groups under the measure of its dominant norms. [...] Given the normality of its own cultural expressions and identity, the dominant group constructs the differences which some groups exhibit as lack of negation. These groups become marked as Other."

According to Young, when internalizing stereotyped images established by a dominant culture, the Other group experiences "double consciousness," which implies a process wherein one always sees oneself through the eyes of others — one is defined by two cultures, a dominant and a subordinate one. Member of a group marked as the Other experiences oneself both as invisible and as different. A dominant group only recognizes its own culture, the experience of a group marked as the Other is invisible and foreign to it.

"How do you recognize a stranger?" – this is the question asked by Sarah Ahmed, a postcolonial theorist, in her book *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality.* ³⁴ According to Ahmed, it is wrong to formulate the question this way since the stranger is not someone we simply fail to recognize. The stranger is somebody whom we have already recognized when we marked her as a stranger.

Ahmed argues that there are techniques that allow us to differentiate between those who are strangers and those who are not. Such techniques involve "reading the bodies of others." After recognizing "strangers," it is easier to enforce boundaries, to demarcate spaces that belong to us, that is, safe places where we dwell, and where "strangers" do not belong. Ahmed also talks about the danger of "strangers" coming too close – since they are constructed as dangerous from the beginning, they represent an ever-approaching threat.³⁵

The topic of othering is prominent in the key texts of postcolonial theory. In the context of our study, we are particularly interested in the theory of othering as presented in Edward Said's famous work, *Orientalism*. Said defines³⁶ orientalism (and the process of orientalization) as a form of thought, a cultural and political reality based on the ontological and epistemological differentiation between "us" and "them." According to Said, the relationship between "us" and "them" is a relationship of power, domination, and varying degrees of complex hegemony. Such correlation of relative strength is not an isolated occasion but rather a phenomenon that functions in various geographic and historical contexts. Said builds on Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony and suggests that in any nontotalitarian society certain ideas and opinions are more prominent than others; such cultural superiority forms cultural hegemony while **the latter strengthens and reinforces orientalism**. Orientalism is a collective idea that contributes to the formation of "**them**" in opposition to "**us**."

Said maintains that Orientalism should not be understood only in the context of geographical divisions, nor as a direction that is passively expressed by culture, knowledge, or institutions, or as a combination of texts written solely on the "Orient." In contrast, it must be understood as a set of "interests" that, through scientific discoveries and scholarly texts, not only produces but also maintains itself. It is a type of will or intention to understand, control, and manipulate that, which is markedly different. Said's main argument is that Orientalism, an important dimension of modern political and intellectual culture, denotes "our" worldview more than the Orient.

9

³⁴ Sara Ahmed. 2000. Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality.

³⁵ On the topic of alienation and threat see Kamran Mamedov's blog: Dominant Gaze on the Azerbaijani Community of Georgia. https://bit.ly/2CtjYqf.

³⁶ Edward Said. 1978. Orientalism.

Said describes the differences, real or imagined, or more precisely, dispositions towards the differences, which reinforce the mentioned dichotomy. These binaries emphasize the differences between "us" and "them". Here, "they" are strange, unnatural, weird, irrational, vindictive, dubious (and not amicable), and different, especially in relation to "us" – the rational, dignified, amicable, normal, and logical. This differentiation involves the relationship between the weak and the strong where the weak are the ones dominated by the strong. "Cultural strength" is attributed to the dominant group, while the "other" is considered backward.

According to Said, in order to maintain the progression of the process described above, and to function harmoniously (without interruptions) in such a machine, it is necessary to have an uninterrupted relationship of power between the strong and the weak, which is an integral feature of Orientalism, as well as of any other perspective built on a clearly differentiated radical contrast.

Going back to Sara Ahmed's demarcation of boundaries, these would be the relevant questions for our study: Whose space is beyond the borders of our safe space? Who does and does not belong there? What processes contribute to the harmonious functioning of the machine described by Said? In her work, *The Politics of Belonging*³⁷, Nira Yuval-Davis differentiates between belonging and the politics of belonging. Belonging is an emotional attachment; it resembles being "at home" and includes a sense of hopefulness. In part, it is based on the feeling of home as a "safe place." Belonging also becomes part of daily practices and is naturalized, politicized, and formally structured when it is under threat. Politics of belonging, on the other hand, comprises specific political projects.

In social sciences, this concept is emphasized when discussing people's belonging to various collectivities and the state. What are the expressions of such belonging?

To better understand the concept of social and political belonging, Yuval-Davis identifies three analytical dimensions/nodes where belonging is being constructed: 1) Social locations; 2) Identifications and emotional attachments to various groups; and 3) Systems of ethnic and political values, based on which humans determine their own or others' belonging. All three nodes are interconnected yet none of them can be collapsed into one another.

As for the *politics of belonging*, it implies not only boundary setting, but also the inclusion and exclusion of specific people, social categories, and groups within those boundaries by those who hold power.

Formal identification of people based on their nationality or citizenship determines whether they belong to a particular community, while regional, ethnic, racial, or religious differences are the main markers of citizenship and belonging.

In the next section we offer an analysis of our research data and the main findings of the study. The study made it possible to identify signs of cultural dominance, to study the multifaceted process that contributes to the construction of the "other/stranger," which is vital for cultural dominance. In other words, it is only possible to maintain cultural dominance through a harmonious and uninterrupted functioning of these mechanisms.

_

 $^{^{37}}$ Nira Yuval-Davis. 2011. The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations.

Analysis of Research Data and Main Findings

Language, Communication, Socialization

All interviews with older participants of the study were recorded in Russian or Azerbaijani, while interviews with younger respondents – in Georgian. When asked about their preferred language, the latter chose Georgian instead of Russian.

The majority of young respondents believe that they are obliged to know the official language of their country of citizenship. In their opinion, this is a sign of their love for their homeland, respect of the state and its people.

The younger generation prioritizes learning Georgian since they want to attend Georgian higher education institutions. They want to learn the language and become "active citizens" of the country.

When discussing the 1+4 Program, the study participants contend that despite its shortcomings and flaws, the program was undoubtedly useful for them. If it would have been difficult to find the resources to learn Georgian language and literature otherwise, the program enabled them to attend Georgian higher education institutions. However, they also recall negative aspects of the program: "Imagine young people who know absolutely nothing about Georgian language. Obviously, one year is not enough to learn the language to the degree of attending lectures and understanding their content. [...] Georgian letters are different, they are hard on the eyes."³⁸

The majority of respondents believe that learning a language academically requires at least two years of training, one year is not enough to express your thoughts freely: "I remember learning more than fifty topics by heart for the exam and soon forgetting everything. Only from the third year did I start learning with my own words…"

It should also be noted that various studies emphasize the success of this program in terms of promoting civic integration. The Public Defender's report states that "some graduates of the program are well versed in the official and native languages, they are qualified within their chosen profession, and it is crucial to assist them in employment and career advancement." A 2018 study³⁹ that looked at the problem of identity among the youth also found that the program had a positive effect on the process of learning. The program "not only encouraged the applicants to consider Georgian universities, but also motivated them to continue their studies on the whole."

In addition to young people, respondents from the older generation are also trying to find ways to learn the language yet they think that it might be too late. Talking about this topic causes them embarrassment and tension. To illustrate the contrast, they often cite the example of their grandchildren or children who speak Georgian fluently. They "justify" their situation by suggesting that this issue did not warrant proper attention when they were young, hence it is "not their fault." They also emphasize that in Azerbaijani villages they have always lived in isolation from Georgians. There is a hint of regret in their narrative regarding the indifference of Soviet policies of teaching Georgian language to ethnic minorities. The respondents often blame the state for not providing proper opportunities for studying the language: "First of all, it's not my fault that we don't know the language. It's the fault of the government. [...] We have the desire, but we don't have the opportunities. We need to know the language, it is important for finding a job. [...] In the past, we mainly studied Russian and Azerbaijani, and only took Georgian classes once or twice weekly. Nobody obliged us to know Georgian, it was a matter of personal desire... Now, I really want to know the language but I think that the state is not taking the issue seriously. The reason could be that they, in

³⁸ Interview. Respondent #1.

³⁹ Zviadadze and Jishkariani. 2018. EMC.

the government, do not want us to know the Georgian language. If they did, they would organize language courses after classes."⁴⁰

Vagif continues: "the state is not solving the issue of teaching the Georgian language because it would not suit it. Once they know the language, they could use it for everything." He believes that knowing the language would mean that Azerbaijanis are informed about their rights, and the state does not want that. Furthermore, the respondent suggests that only language proficiency is not enough for complete integration into society. Often young people learn the language yet have no familiarity with the culture, and subsequently, they wrongfully presume that all their problems would be solved if only they knew the language: "Other subjects were more important than the language, I could learn the language later. It would be a little difficult, but I would learn it. Let's take Georgian – learning only the language did not mean anything for my integration into Georgian society. You only know the language, but don't know the culture, literature, traditions, religion. [...] I think that in order to feel like a full-blooded Georgian citizen, you need to have information about Georgian literature, religion; it won't work otherwise."

Older respondents of the study, who are public school teachers or principals, were preparing for the general skills exam at the time of the interview, which would take place in Georgian. Despite the difficulty of the process, they say that they spare no effort to not "lag behind" their grandchildren—the new generation, and to receive high scores on the exam. As mentioned above, in the older generation, we find a critical attitude towards state policy in regards to language teaching programs. Especially in the villages, despite the motivation there is no opportunity to learn the language. They believe that the focus on the younger generation in language programs is not the right approach. Notwithstanding their desire, they are unable to find the appropriate state services and continue to rely on the Russian language, which often creates further discomfort and barriers when communicating with Georgians. They recollect instances when their Russian warranted negative attitudes from Georgians: "During Saakashvili's time, we would talk in Russian when we went to the hospital, but today, if we ask a question in Russian, they will shout back, asking why we don't know Georgian."

Knowledge of the Russian language helps the older generation not to be in an information vacuum. However, the study also revealed that in such cases, the information is mainly obtained from Russian-language sources. In the framework of the study, we recorded several interviews with representatives of the older generation in the Azerbaijani language since they did not speak either Georgian or Russian. According to one respondent, those who do not speak either of these languages are the most isolated: "My generation and I always check our information against other sources, the language is not a barrier. However, there are individuals who learn about current affairs in Georgia from Russian web-sites. They know Russian and read Russian. The problem is that the previous generation at least knew Russian and if they had a problem, they could explain it in Russian. There is a middle generation, however, that knows neither Russian nor Georgian, and you can imagine, they are in the worst situation."

Several respondents talk about the contrasting worldviews of different generations, as well as the difficulties experienced by the older generation when living in the "new reality," which in turn is linked to the Soviet Union. They argue that attitudes towards the national language significantly differ between generations: "It is very difficult to change the older generation, they were raised in a certain way. Today, the new generation thinks differently, not only in regards to the state language. Members of the new generation feel that they are an important part of this country, that this is their land as well. [...] In other words, they have completely different values compared to the older generation. The

⁴⁰ Interview. Respondent #2.

⁴¹ Interview. Respondent #3.

older generation lived through the Soviet era and they remained in their **closed space** even after independence; now we live in a completely different **reality**."

Moreover, for the majority of young respondents who are fluent in Georgian, social media is the space where they can discuss various critical issues. They initiate new conversations, express their position, show their dissatisfaction, and critically engage with problems that are relevant to the Azerbaijani community.

Many participants talk about a transformation that accompanies being fluent in Georgian. They also recall feelings of embarrassment and shame associated with not knowing the language: "I was so embarrassed that I did not know it. If a Georgian asked me for street directions, I did not understand a word and was extremely ashamed. Thank god, now I know some things." The embarrassement also stemmed from unfamiliarity with the Georgian culture: "It is shameful for me that I did not know anything about Rustaeli, Ilia, or others whom the whole world knows, and I didn't. This is because I did not know the language and I couldn't learn in Georgian."

For many of them, elimination of language barriers played a significant role not only in their daily lives, but also in important decision-making. For instance, **Teiva** recalls that he felt like a stranger when he visited Baku, despite the fact that in Georgia, he was isolated from Georgians and did not even know them or their culture. It was in Baku that he experienced a strong feeling that despite the common language, this was not his country. It was after learning Georgia through the 4+1 Program that Teiva decided to continue higher education in his homeland rather than in a foreign environment, Azerbaijan: "When my parents also saw that I was learning the language, we decided to stay here and not go to a foreign country. That's because we are Georgian citizens and our home is here. I did not like it in Azerbaijan, not because I don't love the place, but because it's not my country, it's foreign to me."

Respondents describe with pleasure how they are now able to assist their family members or neighbors in taking care of certain issues: "If relatives or neighbors receive a letter from a bank or the Public Service Hall, they call me and I explain everything."

As already mentioned, the majority of the respondents describe the feeling of living in a new reality after overcoming the language barrier. Furthermore, they differentiate between the spoken and the grammar-heavy Georgian learned in the school. They emphasize that school material is not sufficient for learning Georgian. For them, daily communication with Georgian friends was crucial for learning the language. Some of them also mastered the language as a result of their military service in the army. However, this only applies to the younger generation and not to Georgian and Azerbaijani families leading isolated lives in villages.

We should also mention the role of ethnic Georgian teachers employed in Azerbaijani villages in teaching Georgian language and culture, as well as in forming friendly relations with the Azerbaijani community. Each and every participant of the study recalls with warmth many examples of support and extraordinary friendship from Georgian teachers.

For example, Aisha lived away from home in a mixed village for some time and attended a Georgian school. Despite the difficulties of adapting to a foreign environment, she positively describes the support of her Georgian Language and Literature teacher in the process of learning the language: "She would make special outlines for me and I fondly remember that. She made me fall in love with the subject." One could say that all respondents, regardless of their age, only have positive memories and long-lasting friendships with Georgian teachers working in Azerbaijani schools.

As pointed out, interactions with Georgian teachers were decisive not only for learning Georgian, but also for becoming acquainted with Goergian culture: "[A Georgian teacher] called me and asked, 'Do you want to learn Georgian?' 'Of course, I am a citizen of Georgia and I want to learn it, but I can't.' 'Let me teach you then.' The teacher would come almost every day from Tbilisi; sometimes she would

stay at my neighbor's house. I was always with her [...]. I knew nothing about Georgian culture or character. I learned everything Georgian from my teacher."

This positive experience impelled Dilgam to stay in Georgia: "Before that, I used to think that I would not be able to study in Georgia. I wanted to go to Baku or to Russia. [...] In the eleventh grade, when teacher Ana took over, she showed us that it was not that hard to learn Georgian. Plus, we fell in love with her and I felt embarrassed if I did not know the lesson. So, I studied and then I passed the entrance exams."

Respondents emphasize that learning Georgian does not imply forgetting one's own language: "I am not saying that I will forget my language, I don't want to forget my language, I love my language, ethnicity, religion, but I also love my country." One of the study participants, who is a Russian language teacher in an Azerbaijani school, reveals her disapproval of the new trend wherein parents take their children directly to Georgian schools, which has a negative impact on their education: "Our children need to learn Georgian, but only under the condition that nothing Azerbaijani is taken away from us. [...] Some parents started taking their children straight to Georgian schools and they graduate without knowing anything because they can't learn due to the language barrier. In our school, on the other hand, they take Georgian five times per week until they graduate. More than thirty students from our school entered higher education institutions in Tbilisi. Isn't that good? Are we doing anything wrong? Georgian is, of course, necessary, but one should not forget one's own language and culture."

Segregated Spaces

Although younger generation respondents clearly reveal a tendency of overcoming the language barrier, they still experience living in isolation from Georgians, both in Azerbaijani and mixed settlements. Azerbaijanis usually communicate with Georgians in public spaces, such as banks, shops, pharmacies, hospitals, and service facilities. In remote Azerbaijani villages of Kvemo Kartli, they only meet their Georgian acquaintances or guests at funerals, weddings, administrative offices, or when official delegations visit their schools. In the opinion of one of the respondents, this generates a sense of not belonging to the same country: "That's why we don't know each other well, we don't learn about each other's cultures and are not interested in them; that's why we don't feel like we are the children of the same country. That means that we need to change something. It's as if the lives of these communities follow parallel paths without ever crossing one another. This is a catastrophe. Isn't this "othering"? — where the "other," despite its attempts to know you and your language, always remains foreign to you."

One of the activists who participated in the study speaks with heartache about isolation and lack of interest experienced by the community. The respondent recalls an incident when only Azerbaijanis attended a cultural event organized to showcase Azerbaijani dance and music even though knowledge of Azerbaijani was not a requirement. Azerbaijanis, on their partn, avoid the Marneuli House of Culture, where according to the respondents, mostly Georgian culture is represented: "Everything there is Georgian, so Azerbaijanis avoid it." Hence, we could talk about lack of interest on both sides although respondents offer a clear explanation of their position.

A respondent from Marneuli district expressed concern about the mutual disaffiliation: "Now imagine, there are two neighboring villages — one Georgian, one Azerbaijani, — and they have no information about one another." These circumstances considerably hinder the process of integration. Respondents also remember having no information about Georgia in school due to the lack of socialization with Georgians and general isolation: "You live in a certain place and have no idea about what's going on elsewhere. I had probably visited Tbilisi only once before I finished school. That's your territory, this is mine. You still remain an Azerbaijani and they are still separate; they don't mix or become friendly."

Another respondent describes with regret that in Marneuli they never get to communicate with Georgians except in public spaces; they do not have close relationships. That contributes to the existence of a language barrier.

Respondents also recall discriminatory attitudes, aggression, or **lack of acceptance** from Georgians. They find it hard to forget these negative experiences.

For instance, one of the respondents from Marneuli reveals that employees of the local government are often "aggressive or radical" towards Azerbaijanis. They express their disposition in social media: "They will talk about us in social media and knowing their attitude, we don't want to go there anymore. [...] What else do you want? Why do you complain? You need to be grateful that you live in our country. That's how they think of us."

Dilgam recalls a painful episode from his student years, when a lecturer's negative attitude towards his language skills ("If you are an Azerbaijani, then what do you want here? Go and study in Azerbaijan") became a motivation to master Georgian.

Respondents also often talk about being called "**Tatar**" in a negative context: "I remember there was a Georgian kid in the kindergarten who would make fun of me and call me a Tatar."

The study revealed that representatives of older generation identify as Azerbaijanis while younger people as Turks: "We are not Tatars at all, we are Azerbaijanis" said an elderly respondent, to which a twenty-one year old participant retorted, "We are Turks, not Azerbaijanis."

Negative incidents that endure in the memory of the respondents follow the same pattern and are often linked to **linguistic or ethnic alienation**. However, young respondents also share their fervid reactions to similar incidents: "I said [...] I am a citizen of Georgia and if you have a proof that I am a guest here, then show it to me. If not, then you should be the one to leave. He told me to either be quiet or to go to my country. I asked where he thought my country was and he said in Azerbaijan. I took out my ID and showed it to him, then I asked him to show his. He turned out to be two years younger than me. I said that I was older and hence, I had become a Georgian citizen earlier than him. So, he was my quest."

In this regard, it is interesting to look at a 2017 study⁴² that examines prejudices towards various minority groups. The study revealed that respondents "perceive the interests of ethnic minorities in opposition to the majority and therefore, perceive them as a threat." The participants anticipated that ethnic Georgians and non-Georgians had different economic situations, the latter being granted privileges by the state. Overall, young people in Georgia were found to have a negative attitude towards ethnic minorities living in Georgia.

Azerbaijani respondents talk about the problem of cultural representation, in textbooks and in public spaces. They feel that both the Orthodox Church and the state are trying to label Kvemo Kartli as "an ancient Georgian land," where "Azerbaijanis cannot lay claim to anything that is old." Accordingly, they try to "expel, swallow, Georgianize, erase" anything that proves historical presence of Azerbaijanis in Kvemo Kartli. This seemingly incomprehensible, careless, and heedless policy leads to the impoverishment of local culture.

Before moving to specific instances of the **erasure of Azerbaijani traces**, let me touch on the issue of Azerbaijani representation in school textbooks and other materials **since these are directly connected to the stories of "erasure" shared by the study participants.**

Respondents talk about the absence of ethnic Azerbaijani representation in school textbooks: "I always had questions about the history of my community in Georgia, but I could never find answers in

⁴² "Student Attitudes Towards Minorities and the Role of Media." 2017. Tolerance and Diversity Institute.

the textbooks. **Nothing was written about us.** Imagine, I grew up in Georgia, in a Georgian-Azerbaijani community, but I can't find any information about us that I would be **proud of**. We have no information about the **achievements** of our community, things we have created, things we have done."

Due to insufficient/scarce representation they often feel alienated from Georgians, citing the lack of information about Georgian Azerbaijanis as the main reason. Children start to ask questions about this issue already in school. Fuad recalls a number of occasions when his classmates at the university thought that he was from Azerbaijan rather than from Georgia because of his different sounding name. In his opinion, the reason for this is the lack of interest and desire on the part of Georgians to learn more about the ethnic diversity of Georgian culture, which makes it richer and more interesting. Many respondents talk about this diversity as one of the virtues of the country that is not properly recognized and valued by its citizens.

This is how Aisha remembers her first realization that she had never come across information about her own community:

"I never thought about this when I was a student at the university, whether we are culturally represented anywhere. One day I saw a Facebook status in which a kid studying in Tbilisi was asking his parent: When I read about a topic in textbooks, I only find Georgian names – Temo, Gio, Irakli, but I never see Azerbaijani names. **Are we not here?** After this, I also started thinking."

Respondents often cite **the example of history textbooks** to illustrate the scarcity of information about ethnic Azerbaijani history. They say that such information either does not exist at all, or is problematic. The details they find in history textbooks — when they settled in Georgia, where they came from, how many centuries they have been here — is a very important and sensitive issue for them: "Even though Georgian society believes that **we settled here** some time ago, that's not an accurate representation since this was a process that occured over centuries. We are the descendants of Turks, of Turkish tribes. I wanted to have at lease one or two lessons on our history... I don't see **myself in the history of Georgia**... I have never come across Azerbaijanis in Georgian history. Why didn't I ask this question earlier? Because our own approach is also erroneous, we also think that we settled here and we don't perceive ourselves as **belonging here**. That's the problem."

Furthermore, when reflecting about this issue, it is common to create distance with Azerbaijan, which is only perceived as a neighboring country⁴³:

"In the fifth grade we started studying Azerbaijani history as our own history. Can you imagine? That's when I realized – 'But this is the history of Azerbaijan!' I don't identify Azerbaijan with Azerbaijanis here. There are a lot of differences. Older books offered no information about ethnic Azerbaijanis, and new books are worse since they offer a negative account."

It is important for them to learn more about "the historical battles that they fought in, the kind of cultural heritage they have, what they built or accomplished." They find it unthinkable to live in a country for centuries and have no recorded history.

In addition to history textbooks, which as respondents note, should include material on Azerbaijanis living in Georgia, it is also crucial to represent Georgian-Azerbaijani and Azaerbaijani public figures in literature textbooks.

According to one respondent, if we want to create a society where ethnic minorities (Azerbaijanis, Armenians, Russians, etc.) can **coexist harmoniously and respectfully** with Georgians, a textbook needs to be developed, which will illustrate the **merits** of ethnic minorities living in Georgia that everyone needs to know about, including Georgians. In the opinion of the respondents, this kind of

⁴³ Regarding discriminative statements of public officials see Kamran Mamedov's blog: "Should We Expect an Apology from Mariam Jashi?" http://liberali.ge/blogs/view/43472/unda-moikhados-tu-ara-bodishi-mari-jashma.

textbook can facilitate **full integration**, which is a process that requires **mutual effort**. It requires mutual acceptance, familiarity, interest, and friendship.

During the course of the study, it was interesting to learn about the public figures who are dear to the community, and who should definitely be included in a common textbook. These individuals – poets, writers, public figures, – are natives of Kvemo Kartli. Members of the community know their biographies and are acquainted with their works:

"For example, our famous Zelimkhan lagob had to leave Bolnisi and work in Azerbaijan until the end of his life since he was not appreciated here. His **poems** would have to be translated for Georgians to be familiar with him. Since there were no opportunities for him here, he was forced to leave. There were other talented individuals who had to leave for Azerbaijan due to the lack of opportunities."

A 2018 survey⁴⁴ also reveals the process of new identity-building among Georgia's Azerbaijani youth who "are ready and willing to recognize and belong to Georgia as a political unit." "The desire to identify with the Georgian national project" became apparent in the present study as well.

Our research revealed that the **process of search and representation** is continuous and vital for the community. They want to show examples of what they are **proud** of and what others could also be interested in, which in turn would allow them to feel like **insiders** rather than **outsiders**, to feel like they are natives rather than Azerbaijanis or those who have been **resettled** from Azerbaijan:

"If our history was part of Georgian history textbooks, I would feel like I belong in Georgia rather than in Azerbaijan. Yes, I do know that I am part of Georgia, that I represent Georgia, but Georgians should also validate that feeling. Having that history would give me the strength to react and say that I am not an Azerbaijani from Baku, I am a citizen of Georgia... Read the history if you don't believe."

Therefore, they often bring up Georgian Azerbaijani **historical figures** who positively contributed to Georgia:

"This year, I think they are planning to erect a monument for a folk hero in Sadakhlo – Khudi Borchalo, who fought against Persians alongside the Georgian king. Even though Persians had the same faith, he **preferred his homeland to the people of his faith.** So, although there is no information about him in history, this person did a lot. However, he is not appreciated. We can't find anything about him in the history of Georgia."

Another prominent hero for the respondents is Farikhanum Sofieva, the world's first democratically elected Muslim woman, who remained unknown for a long time.

The study participants talk about the urgent need to represent the culture of ethnic minorities:

"I remember always reading in school textbooks about the culture that Georgians were proud of. Georgian Azerbaijanis have an exceptional tradition of weaving carpets — Ashughis, they have traditional music. Kvemo Kartli has its own carpet weaving culture distinguished by its unique patterns; their style of music is also different."

Fuad believes that tourists would definitely be interested in the ethnic diversity of Georgia. However, "it is unfortunate that Georgian politicians only remember about the Azerbaijani community during the elections."

The respondents repeatedly noted that they want Georgians to also know of their heroes, to appreciate that Georgian Azerbaijanis have contributed to the development of the country, to get to know the Azerbaijani culture better. **This process would give them an opportunity to leave their mark on their homeland**, which they are forced to prove in **different domains** on a daily basis. That is why

-

⁴⁴ Zviadadze and Jishkariani. 2018.

identification and representation of histories that emphasize the Azerbaijani imprint on Georgian history are so critical for them.

Houses of Culture and Their Policy

When discussing the problem of cultural representation, respondents talk about houses/centers of culture, which should be serving this purpose. However, in some villages these centers exist only formally and locals cannot use them to represent the culture of the Azerbaijani community.

For example, respondents from Marneuli suggest that they associate the Marneuli House of Culture exclusively with Georgian culture when the majority of the population in Marneuli is Azerbaijani: "Everything is in Georgian; the dances, the ensemble, the singers, the paintings, they are all Georgian, only Georgian culture and traditions. I have a friend here who approached them to start saz (a musical instrument) courses and asked them for a minimum wage. They told him that similar expenses were not considered in the budget, that such things were not a priority. I thought that the claim that certain expenses are not considered in the budget is a direct discrimination. The House of Culture, with a budget of one million, only accommodates two percent of Marneuli's population."

The overall policy of the Marneuli House of Culture in regards to the planned activities was revealed in an interview with one of the representatives:

"It is our obligation to facilitate integration rather than offer specific activities to a specific ethnic group. We don't only have ethnic Azerbaijanis living in the municipality, there are other ethnicities as well. [...] Naturally, we need to take other minorities into consideration as well. So, it's not our goal to have separate activities. Our goal is not to create artificial divisions, not to make them feel like they are different from the whole society. Our goal is to be equally represented."

The representative cited various activities, classes, and events as an illustration of the fact that "everybody receives the same servises from the House of Culture" – for instance, an arts and crafts class, a painting class, a Georgian choreographic ensemble where 90% of members are Azerbaijanis. According to the representative, the existence of these classes is the best example of integration. As for the Azerbaijani culture, the representative argued that there is a saz learning group in Marneuli and the surrounding villages, and they are planning to start Azerbaijani singing, dancing, and instruments classes.

Regarding the working language, the representative said that "these activities are designed for everyone regardless of their ethnic identity. For example, holidays like the International Child Protection Day, beginning of the new school year, New Year's celebrations, Nowruz, May 26, etc."

According to the representative, the majority of events and activities are held in the official language, but they try to translate if the format allows (i.e. lectures). Overall, however, the main working language is the official language. The representative shared the following thoughts regarding the subject:

"There is a language barrier, but the situation is way better than before. It is still problematic that we are obliged to know the state language since the level of education is low. There is an information vacuum of sorts, I think that in remote villages the population doesn't see the need for that and their level of interest is low since they remain in their narrow circles, in their villages, where it's not essential to know the official language. [...] In other words, for Azerbaijani or for Armenian communities it is often enough to know their own language and communicate with that. However, some are starting to realize that if we know the state language, we can achieve more and the results are outstanding. I might be wrong but the more we see the need to know something, the more we try to learn it... I think

that this should create a motivation for the community, if we offered all our services in the Azerbaijani language, then I wonder whether they would have the desire to learn Georgian."

It should also be noted that a recent assessment conducted by the Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC), based on the information provided by the House of Culture (reports on the activities conducted in collaboration with Azerbaijani community activists, recorded interviews with the director and the deputy director of the Marneuli House of Culture)⁴⁵, identified a number of shortcomings in its activities. The assessment revealed that the "center's activities are less focused on the culture of the Azerbaijani community compared to other ethnic minorities. The asymmetry is sharp, and shows obvious signs of Georgian cultural dominance."

The concerns of respondents representing the local community are also associated with this asymmetry. In their opinion, houses of culture do not properly contribute to the protection and preservation of ethnic minority culture.

Nowruz Bayram

Respondents note that the only Azerbaijani holiday celebrated in Marneuli is **Nowruz Bayram**. ⁴⁶ Yet they express their dissatisfaction that the celebration of Nowruz is devoid of Azerbaijani traditional elements:

"The Nowruz Bayram celebration has nothing in common with Azerbaijani culture. The specific games, traditions, symbols associated with Nowruz are absent. I can't remember anyone singing in the Azerbaijani language on the stage. Traditional songs are completely taken out of the celebration. They might invite someone from Tbilisi to sing. They only organize Nowruz Bayram here to have someone from the central government visit, say a few words in Azerbaijani from the stage, and leave. Nothing else happens afterwards, everyone goes home."

According to respondents, the misrepresentation of Nowruz Bayram is due to the fact that the local government does not have an Azerbaijani representative who is well acquainted with their culture. A respondent from Algeti remembers approaching the local government with the initiative of holding Nowruz Bayram in Algeti since it is a large settlement that unites several villages. Unfortunately, the funding request was declined under the pretext that there was no need for an additional celebration. The respondent explains that in Algeti, they wanted to organize a traditional Nowruz Bayram with Azerbaijani elements, which they do not see in Marneuli. This would also be a protest of sorts.

One of the study participants believes that this is the only Azerbaijani holiday that is celebrated with pomp and hence, it is not enough to only hold it in Marneuli: "Integration seems like a one-way process. If I learned something and am ready, shouldn't you also know what's what? The less you know, the more alienated you'll be. Why shouldn't we have Azerbaijani holidays or houses of culture, or even smaller events, in Zugdidi, Batumi, or Kutaisi? This would give the rest of Georgia an opportunity to learn who we are, that we are the same as you."

Moreover, respondents recall the initiative proposed by the previous government to proclaim Nowruz Bayram as a public holiday, which has since been forgotten.

Some respondents remember that before the 2000s, they felt more support and more was done to preserve their culture. For instance, the House of Culture in Algeti was more active. There were spaces

19

⁴⁵ Assessment of Marneli Cultural Center's policy. https://emc.org.ge/ka/products/marneulis-kulturis-tsentris-politikis-shefaseba.

⁴⁶ Following the initiative of the Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, Nowruz Bayram was declared a public holiday in Georgia in 2010. http://tolerantoba.ge/index.php?news id=173

⁴⁷ Interview. Respondent #4.

of entertainment, where **women were also actively involved** in various events. Today, the only space where events are still being held is in the school, but they only target children. The respondent maintains that the existence of similar spaces is especially important for women: "You feel closed off when you are at home all the time. In those times, we did not have child marriage or domestic violence. Being a woman did not mean being at home. There are no such spaces today, the only interesting place in the village is the school and even that is only for children. In the past, women knew that they could gather in those spaces whenever they had free time." Respondents believe that Azerbaijani women are more tied to their homes, so it is crucial to have spaces where they can gather.

Ethnographic Museum and Library

Several respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that **the material culture that existed in Marneuli was destroyed, "swallowed up and erased"**: "There is almost nothing in Marneuli that I could, for example, show to my foreign friends, even one place that would corroborate Azerbaijani history in Georgia."⁴⁸

By way of illustration, they talk about the former **Ethnographic Museum** of Marneuli, which was replaced by a judo club in the 1990s. They do not even know where the museum exhibits are today. In addition, they remember the **Marneuli Library** that housed thousands of Azerbaijani books, which has long been succeeded by a sports complex. The 30,000 Azerbaijani books were allegedly moved to the House of Culture and stored in a way that renders them inaccessible to the public.

The House of Culture representatives suggest that the problem stems from the events of the 1990s, "which did not target a particular ethnic group and wreaked havoc throughout the country." The House of Culture administration has no information regarding the museum exhibits since they were not in charge of the museum. Nonetheless, they tried to investigate the matter to no avail. They also emphasized that the "museum would contain not only Azerbaijani exhibits, and everything is equally lost."

Concerning the books, our study learned from the representatives of the House of Culture that they belonged to the old library in the 1990s. Since the library was not functional, they erased it in 2006 and built Ata Holding in its place. The library books were moved to the basement of the House of Culture – many were lost in the process of transportation, others were damaged due to ill-suited conditions in the building. When the books were gradually discovered, "they were in a very bad condition. Over years, they became hazardous both for people and for other books. Following numerous consultations with the National Library and the Library Association, we were categorically warned to keep the books away from other books. The matter needs to be investigated further." The representative stressed once again that the collection did not include only Azerbaijani books, it also contained Russian, Georgian, and Armenian literature. Asked if the books could be saved, the respondent replied that the mistake was made when it was decided to transport the books to the basement. However, that happened years ago and they do not know who is responsible. The fate of the damaged books has not yet been decided.

Signs of Cultural Domination

Oktai Kazumov describes cultural exclusion as a process that impoverishes or fully erases local culture, as in the case of the Marneuli Museum. He explains this by arguing that the state does not prioritize the preservation of minority culture. In part, this is because this is a less interesting and inviting issue, but Kazumov also believes that such negligence is also deliberate on the part of the state.

Respondents also mentioned the promotional video⁴⁹ prepared by the Administration of State Representative in Marneuli. The video only popularizes Georgian culture, completely disregarding the

⁴⁸ Interview. Respondent #5.

⁴⁹ https://netgazeti.ge/news/291333/.

Azerbaijani community. Respondents are convinced that this was a deliberate decision, as the governor's staff should have been familiar with the cultural landscape of Kvemo Kartli.

"The video did not even show a mosque. The people were outraged, so they edited the video to their liking. There were crosses and churches everywhere, Georgian dance, chanting, and nothing else in Kvemo Kartli. It seems like our people are being deliberately excluded; we are being told by a certain historian that our history in Georgia does not even exceed five hundred years. I say, I'm sorry but I am being excluded from common history, nothing is written about me, my culture is not being represented, you make a video and leave me out of it. Maybe I was here even fifteen hundred years ago but nobody paid attention to me, nobody included me in the history, isn't that possible?!" 50

Respondents remember taking issue with the video and preparing a new one,⁵¹ yet this action did not merit any response from the Administration of State Representative in Marneuli. On the contrary, they claim they became subject to more aggression from the Georgian side: "Why do you demand things that have no consequence, they said. They accused us of conspiracy."

Respondents maintain that Borchalo and Ashughi carpets represent an authentic and unique cultural phenomenon that is not given due attention by the state:

"In the Azerbaijani carpet-weaving tradition, Borchalo holds a special niche, it is a unique movement. Or let us take Ashughoba, that's different from Borchalo, it has a special place in the Azerbaijani culture. The Georgian population has its own brand, but the Azerbaijani brand is not being taken advantage of. It is all left to its own devices."

In the opinion of the respondents, the country is being represented as monoethnic and monoreligious. Everything non-Georgian is deemed secondary; Georgian culture is dominant and accordingly, popularization and protection of Georgian monuments is prioritized. Consequently, Azerbaijani material culture, old artefacts, books⁵², museum exhibits will gradually deteriorate and disappear unless someone pays attention to them: "We have two choices: we can either ask the neighboring country to come and help us, or our country will refuse to do it and it will all disintegrate."

Respondents recall a number of instances when the Azerbaijani side (often SOCAR) financed various projects, including carpet weaving courses, language courses, Azerbaijani Cultural Center, theater, and museum rehabilitation. It could be argued that all events aimed at preserving Azerbaijani culture are funded by Azerbaijan. If the funding is discontinued, these projects will cease to exist.

"If only Azerbaijan will take care of this, then I will approach them directly for solutions. Does that mean that my Georgian citizenship is only on paper? What are state institutions doing?" However, there are instances when they do not appeal to the Azerbaijani side as a matter of principle, as they believe that a citizen of Georgia should first and foremost have the support and attention of her own state:

"I don't want to approach the Azerbaijani embassy for help. I've had so many opportunities of that so far, but I don't want to because we have to realize eventually that they represent a neighboring country rather than our past and future. They also need to understand that. Our biggest task is to realize that we have been here throughout history and we will continue to be here. We should get rid of the feeling that if something happens between the two countries, we will flee from here."53

⁵⁰ Interview. Respondent #5.

 $^{^{51}\,}http://marneulifm.ge/ka/marneuli/article/14131-mirthagi-asadovis-khelmdzghvanelobith-qvemo-qarthlis-guberniis-sapasukho-videorgoli-momzadda.$

⁵³ Interview. Respondent #3.

The study participants believe that the position of the state is as follows: "If Azerbaijanis live here, why should Georgians build an Azerbaijani house of culture?" Accordingly, respondents have a feeling that they only become citizens of Georgia when the state needs them (during elections), otherwise they are citizens of Azerbaijan.

One of the respondents links the state and public attitude towards non-dominant culture to the narrative that has survived since the 1990s: "The idea is that a pure Georgian cultural identity will produce a pure Georgian state that will be free from the influence of others." The respondent maintains that although the state might believe that minorities are less civilized and evolved, and possess a lesser culture, "they still need to value their role and work towards their integration in Georgian society. Whether you want it or not, they live here and you need to have a strategy. Even if you think that their culture is not valuable, you might have a colonialist vision and want to "enlighten" them. Based on my observation, we don't even find that sort of attitude in a systematic form. I don't know why."

To sum up, respondents feel that there is a lack of interest from the state and society in general towards Azerbaijani culture, partially due to the fact that it is viewed as backward and uncivilized. These attitudes give rise to specific practices that marginalize non-dominant cultures.

Narimanov Park

Respondents know about Narimanov, his origins, and activities. They are also informed about the story behind the renaming of Narimanov Park. They say that the local community accidentally discovered that the official name of the park is different. Many were interested in Nariman Narimanov's contribution to Georgia after the incident and became acquainted with his writing. They explain that the local Azerbaijani community considers the incident an utmost expression of disrespect on the part of the state. All respondents agree that Narimanov has done many good things for his country and for the Azerbaijani people living in Georgia, and that he deserves appreciation and respect. They also think that the excuse that they renamed the park because he was a Bolshevik is artificially fabricated, and irritating for the community:

"What they did is despicable. If you defend Narimanov, you are proclaimed a Communist and if you are a Communist, you are an enemy of Georgia. It was an appalling calculation to which people responded with resurrecting and popularizing Narimanov, restoring him from the ashes like a phoenix. I personally learned more about him as a result, I read his play. These are some thoughtless policies, thoughtless strategies. [...] They are anti-state, isolating, and desensitizing." 54

Respondents believe that naming the park after Merab Kostava rather than an Azerbaijani public figure is a wrong decision that creates artificial problems between the two communities. Each and every Azerbaijani public figure born in Georgia is consequential for the community and hence, it is important that the Park is named after Narimanov.

Respondents discuss this case as part of the process of erasing, Georgianizing, and eradicating Azerbaijani culture in the region.

Toponyms

As is known, many villages were renamed in Kvemo Kartli in the 1990s, and this practice was particularly prevalent in villages surrounding Bolnisi. Respondents believe that most of the replaced Azerbaijani names were not Communist at all: "Parkhalo became Talaveri, Arakhlo — Nakhiduri, something else became Mukhrana, they came up with some random names. For some reason, they decided that Azerbaijani toponyms were not allowed in Georgia." Participants of the research perceive

⁵⁴ Interview. Respondent #5.

these changes as disrespectful to the local culture and as part of the ongoing attempt to Georgianize the region. Although locals continue to use old names in their daily interactions, signs display new names, which creates significant challenges for the population (especially when moving between villages).

Respondents recall another instance when an Azerbaijani holiday – **Elati Bayram**, which was held in Dmanisi, was given a Georgian name – **Dmanisoba**:

"One day was set aside for the Azerbaijanis of Borchalo – the Elati celebration. Borchalo Azerbaijanis living abroad came to Dmanisi for Elati Bayram, it was a day of our unity. There were various events, wrestling, competitions, meetings, Dmanisians also came... Then they changed the name and called it Dmanisoba and not Elati Bayram. After that, the population was no longer interested, nothing is being planned as before, no one does anything and nobody visits. I think that since these people have been living here for so long, regardless of their ethnicity, they have the right to celebrate their holiday." Respondents maintain that these incidents hinder the process of integration into Georgian society since they seem to push towards assimilation. They understand the differenc between integration and assimilation perfectly well and consider these instances as discriminatory: "My identity is very important to me and I don't want it to be taken away. I am proud of being an Azerbaijani Georgian and I represent both cultures (rather than both countries)."

Respondents also cite the example of Bolnisi as a fully Georgianized city. In an interview conducted in one of the Azerbaijani villages of Bolnisi, a respondent noted that "Bolnisi is for Georgians and Georgians should live there. We remain villagers... If you want to buy a house in Bolnisi, they won't allow you to do so if you have an Azerbaijani name. For instance, If I go there to buy a house in my name, my neighbor will also want to do it, and there will be many Azerbaijanis in Bolnisi... It will be bad. Germans lived there in the past, then Azerbaijanis, and now Georgians."

Only younger respondents talk about the events of the 1990s, the confrontation, the removal of Azerbaijanis from Bolnisi, the forced expulsion from the city. Although they themselves have not witnessed these events, they are becoming familiar with relevant sources, they listen to stories told by their parents and representatives of older generation. As pointed out by one of the respondents: "Young people talk about that more often because they understand that it was a consequence of discrimination... On the other hand, representatives of older generation talk about those events in very small and domestic circles since they are still afraid that they might be punished for talking. Younger people are not afraid of that." 56

In the course of our research, respondents from older generation were embarrassed and unwilling to talk about the confrontations of the 1990s. Alternatively, they declared very briefly that "what happened in the 1990s was a mistake and it will never happen again."

The study also revealed that symbolic designation of the local church/diocese as an "ancient Georgian land" is a widespread practice. When visiting various villages, we found that crosses were displayed not only in Georgian or mixed, but also in Azerbaijani villages. Respondents say they do not understand the position of the church: "We don't understand what they want. Does anybody deny that Kvemo Kartli is Georgia? Putting crosses next to the cemeteries cannot make them Christian." Some respondents consider these actions discriminatory:

_

⁵⁵ For more about Dmanisoba see Mariam Shalvashvili's essay. https://emc.org.ge/ka/products/dmanisoba-gadatserili-dghesastsauli-da-kulturuli-dominatsiis-mekanizmi

⁵⁶ Interview. Respondent #6.

"What is a cross doing in an Azerbaijani village? If you leave from here, you will find a cross at the entrance of every Azerbaijani village. The local Orthodox diocese gives the permission to do that. In this case, it is visible to the naked eye that state policy is very loyal to Orthodox Christianity. Sometimes it is very hard for an ordinary citizen to distinguish whether the state or the church makes these discriminatory steps... This is meant to show who the boss is - "кто в доме хозяин." You are constantly being told that you are a national minority, they always emphasize that you are in the minority." ⁵⁷

Historian Davit Jishkariani believes that in Kvemo Kartli, the Orthodox Church is the most aggressive opponent of local culture: "The state doesn't have a number of critical programs, it doesn't have an assimilation or integration program, the only existing program is the Christianization program launched by the Church. That's the only one operating and visible there." In respondents' view, the placement of crosses is a reminder that this is a Christian land.

According to respondents, the Orthodox Church is a powerful actor in the Georgian reality. It is exclusive towards ethnic minorities, it offers a narrow ethnic and religious definition of Georgianness, leaving all other ethnic groups outside the group boundaries.

Conclusion

Data obtained in the course of this research reflects the complex picture of cultural dominance in Kvemo Kartli. Based on this material, we can talk about a simultaneously targeted and thoughtless state policy, which adversely affects the daily life of the Azerbaijani community.

Interviews conducted with representatives of the Azerbaijani community share a common narrative of anticipating recognition, expressed in the desire to be seen by the dominant culture. The first objective is for Georgian society to recognize their problems. Members of the community also maintain that it is necessary to reconsider the concepts of citizenship and Georgianness, and to eliminate ethnocentric attitudes. Consequently, they believe that non-dominant ethnic groups should not be perceived as secondary, but as an integral part of Georgian society.

Respondents also talk about the need for public realization that integration is a two-way process. They suggest that the quality of Georigan language teaching programs should be significantly improved. This would create a feeling among the Azerbaijani community that integration is part of state policy, that the state actually cares about the community and does not simply follow the recommendations of the international community and organizations.

Respondents would like to see that dominant and non-dominant groups together participate in the building of the Georgian state and its future.

Overall, the study produced several key findings:

- a) The Georgian language is dominant in every sector of the public domain. There is neither interest nor willingness on the part of the state to ensure a fair distribution of resources in order to eliminate this shortcoming. Non-recognition of this issue is also a clear problem.
- b) There is no real effort on the part of the state to support the development of local culture.
- c) History and culture of the ethnic Azerbaijani community are not represented in a way that enhances a sense of community. There is no collective memory narrative that would integrate the community.
- d) There is a strong sense of social alienation and exclusion in the community, further reinforced by acts of othering and being represented as a temporary presence that belongs in Azerbaijan.

-

 $^{^{\}rm 57}$ Interview. Respondent #7.

e) There is a strong interest among young Azerbaijanis to become part of the common political project, which is reflected in their self-organization and mobilization. This is an ongoing bottom-up process. Young people are interested in political mobilization and their interest in the question of identity contributes to their self-determination.

Distinct from the dominant group and labeled as "other," the Azerbaijani community feels invisible and unrecognized by the state and general society. The dominant Georgian society only recognizes its own culture while concerns and experiences of the Azerbaijani community, the so-called "other," remain invisible and unknown.

In the words of Sarah Ahmed, "strangers" are familiar to us exactly because we already recognized them as not belonging when we marked them as "strangers." The Azerbaijani community is constructed in the process of being recognized as "strange," as the "other" who does not belong within the borders of what we have marked as "ours." The state demarcates these borders via various techniques, producing restricted areas where "we" – ethnic Georgians – live, and where "others" are not needed. This place is safe and secure against the encroachment of "strangers." At the same time, the ethnically non-dominant Azerbaijani community has a strong emotional attachment to its homeland, but it does not experience a sense of belonging since it does not have a "home" that offers hope for the future. The community is being constantly reminded, often symbolically, that this is a "Christian" land and hence, they - Muslims - do not fit into the dominant definition of Georgianness. In order to keep the mentioned processes alive, it is necessary to maintain the relationship of power between the strong (dominant) and the weak (non-dominant, "secondary"), which requires a constant production of radical contrast. The Orthodox Church is one of the main actors in the production of "other," which helps to preserve cultural dominance. The Church dominance is not being restricted by the state with effective and tangible policies of integration, and more inclusive, fair, and broader understanding of citizenship that would allow non-dominant ethnic groups to become part of the political unit, share political power, and have equal access to rights, opportunities, and resources. Behind cultural hierarchies and dominance, we find the problem of political, economic, and social hierarchization and neglect that affects the daily lives of non-dominant groups and further complicates the lack of recognition and erasure on symbolic and cultural levels.

Under these conditions, the creation of a fair political, social, and cultural environment for non-dominant ethnic groups by the state is essential. In addition, a cultural policy that takes into consideration the issues of identity, epistemology, and ontology can have significant potential for social change and interethnic dialogue. At the same time, practices of eradicating, dominating, and neglecting minority cultures can have a damaging effect on the integration process and further deepen the exclusion of certain groups.