



IDENTITY ISSUES AMONG AZERBAIJANI POPULATION OF KVEMO KARTLI AND ITS POLITICAL AND SOCIAL DIMENSIONS

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Researchers: Sopo Zviadadze and Davit Jishkariani
Research Coordinator: Tamta Mikeladze,
Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC)

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Introduction:

Recognition of religious and ethnic minorities, as well as the question of their social and cultural engagement is one of the major challenges for the Georgian state. This issue is closely linked to the emergence of Georgia as a judicial and democratic state, and its social consolidation.

Minority politics in Georgia have been changing and evolving since the 1990s, however we have yet to witness suitable solutions to the challenges that this multi- religious and multiethnic state faces in regards to integration. Among these issues are low level of political participation, low level of formal education, discrimination and cultural hierarchies.

Azerbaijanis represent the largest ethnic minority in Georgia. According to the 2014 census, ethnic minorities make up 13,2 % of the total population in Georgia, among them 6,3 % are Azerbaijanis.¹ The majority of Azerbaijanis are densely populated in the Kvemo Kartli region, making up 41,75 % of the total population.²

There is scarce knowledge about history and challenges faced by the ethnic Azerbaijani community living in Georgia both in academic and political circles, and general public. This is due to various reasons, including the language barrier, and the problem of political, social and cultural exclusion.

The issue of Azerbaijani community is usually reduced to the lack of language skills in the national minority integration policy. In the process of integration, the problem is usually explained away by ascribing responsibility to the community itself - as if the latter refuses to learn the official language. In the process of ethnic minority integration, the core problem is that the state views its minority politics within the security paradigm and primarily approaches it through the lens of electoral loyalty. Despite various state initiatives, no suitable radical positive steps are being taken in order to ensure political participation of local populations on central and regional levels, employment within the administrative domain, improved education and sustainable economic development of the region.

¹ 2014 General Population Census, National Statistics Office of Georgia. Total population of Georgia - 3713,8, among them 233,0 Azerbaijanis

² Azerbaijanis also live in Tbilisi and Kakheti (10,2 % of the region's total population). Total population of Kvemo Kartli - 423 986. <http://csem.ge/interactivemap/>

In regards to ethnic Azerbaijanis, the question of cultural identity and belonging within the political/national project of Georgia is multi-faceted and would be difficult to analyze without appropriate historical perspective. Historical experience of the 1990s is an especially traumatic aspect of this identity due to the ascendance of ultra-nationalist political ideas and groups.

The Azerbaijani community of Kvemo Kartli has been experiencing significant political, social and cultural transformations in the post-independence period. These processes are linked to internal, regional and international politics. Challenges faced by the Azerbaijani community today considerably differ from the problems of previous years. The most important social factor is the emergence of a young generation with distinct political conscience and social culture in the aftermath of education policies carried out in the 2010s. Young people are receiving education in Georgian universities and unlike their parents they are able to communicate in Georgian. Hence, representatives of this generation are increasingly becoming involved in Georgian politics and the idea of the Georgian state. They are more critical and express their desire to engage in the country's political life, and become agents of social and political change in the region.

In addition to the mentioned transformations, there are other fundamental changes in the Azerbaijani community. Namely, amidst the backdrop of complex political and cultural changes in the Azerbaijani community, and especially among the youth, we are witnessing new process of identity definition and construction. The latter is characterized by a clear interest and desire to be engaged in the Georgian political project, and demands correct assessment and consideration within academic and political circles.

Unfortunately, political conscience of the youth is incompatible with the region's political landscape and formal structures, which could cause increased social dissatisfaction and disillusionment in the nearest future if not addressed by political parties and the government.

Based on primary research, this document aims to increase awareness of problems surrounding the integration of Azerbaijani community among political parties and various institutions involved in the politics. The goal is to emphasize challenges faced by the Azerbaijani community, as well as the new communal self-identification trend and its political dimensions.

Primary research conducted for this study sought to analyze problems associated with ethnic and cultural identity among the Azerbaijani community living in Kvemo Kartli, and to determine political, social and cultural triggers of identity construction. The main research questions were: is identity "awakening" a process that emerged in the local community and if so, what are its causes? On which narratives is the new identity based, and how do Azerbaijanis of Kvemo Kartli perceive themselves? The study also aimed to identify socio-cultural and political causes that impact identity-construction or its revitalization.

Field research was conducted between March and July of 2018. Target groups were chosen based on age, education, residence, level of integration and organizational affiliation. Among the target groups were: Azerbaijani youth in Tbilisi, Marneuli, Bolnisi, Gardabani, Dmanisi (and neighboring villages); Azerbaijani community organizations active in Marneuli and Tbilisi; Muslim religious figures in the region and other representatives of religious organizations. 35 in-depth interviews

(in Marneuli, Gardabani, Bolnisi, Dmanisi and Tbilisi) and 2 focus groups with Azerbaijani students in Tbilisi were conducted in the framework of the study.³

General Overview of the Context

We cannot disregard conflicting national discourses in Georgia when discussing issues related to ethnic, cultural and national identity of the Azerbaijani community. These two issues are interconnected.⁴ In post-Soviet Georgia, two narratives of national self-determination have been clashing with one another: ethno-religious nationalism (superiority of Christian culture, “Georgian means Christian”), and modern nationalism, which is inclusive in nature and is based on the principle of citizenship that prioritizes sense of unity regardless of religious and ethnic background.⁵

In Georgia, history of ethnic nationalism is strongly tied to the Soviet nationalities policy often referred to as “korenizatsiya”, which encouraged and emphasized ethnic and cultural identity.⁶ Simultaneously, ethnic groups living in various territories of the Soviet Union were socially, politically and culturally hierarchized (based on the principle of “Matryoshka nationalism”), which varied between the republics and periods.⁷

Ethno-religious nationalism that was dominant in Georgia took an especially repressive form in the 1990s, which in turn seriously contributed to the alienation of ethnic groups living in Georgia. During this time, differentiation between “us” and “them” happened along hostile and hierarchical lines.⁸ In the Christian-Georgian nationalist discourse, Azerbaijanis were easily set apart as “others” due to their inability to speak Georgian, their affiliation with Islam, and their distinct ethnicity. The local community was often perceived as a backward, underdeveloped subject. According to an Azerbaijani youth, they became a tamed, “sheepish” community.⁹

The 1990s revealed clear signs of “Georgianization” in the Kvemo Kartli region. As historical experience shows, new political regime always attempts to erase and/or rewrite its predecessor from the collective memory. “Erasure of memory” usually takes place in the symbolic realm and

³ In accordance with the study objectives, several methods of qualitative research were employed: semi-structured in-depth interviews, focus group interviews and content-analysis. Relevant methodology was developed in accordance with the target groups and research objects, and relevant questionnaire was put together for the interviews

⁴ Scholars talk about several paradigms of nationalism: a) primordial/essentialist understanding of the nation: nation as a natural phenomenon with such defining markers as language, territory and ethnicity; b) modernist understanding: nation as a phenomenon of modernity, as a constructed entity and “imagined political unit”. According to Eric Hobsbawm’s argument, nation is not a primordial and unchangeable entity but rather it is “created” within specific historical periods. In his words, “nations do not make states and nationalism but the other way round”

⁵ Smith, Anthony D. *National Identity* (2008); Gellner, Ernst. *Nations and Nationalism* (2003)

⁶ The term and policy originated at the 12th Congress of the Russian Communist Party in 1920, during which a decision was issued in support of the “Aboriginal” populations, which implied ethnic minorities.

⁷ Stalin’s and post-Stalin nationalities policies were distinct. Light, Margot. “Nationalism and Identity in the Former Soviet Union”. *METU Studies in Development* 27(3-4) 2000: 301-319

⁸ “Narcissistic nationalism” that was dominant in Soviet Georgia resulted in clear hierarchization of the country’s ethnic minorities and corresponding regions.

⁹ Karman Mamedov. The Sheepish Ones.

<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%91%E1%83%98/> (Accessed 04/08/2018)

is conveyed through the renaming of towns, villages, streets or squares, as well as the replacement of old statues with new ones. The replacement of Soviet symbols in Kvemo Kartli was primarily performed through nationalistic fervor. In 1990-1991, not only Soviet names, but also pre-Soviet Azerbaijani village names were changed (for example, Parkhalo became Talaveri, Arakhlo became Nakhiduri, and Gochulu became Chapala). Although we no longer find cases of renaming today, this is a sensitive issue for the Azerbaijani community since it reminds them of the problem of “non-recognition”.

History of the 1990s reveals that Azerbaijanis emerged as an image of the enemy in the Georgian national discourse - an ethnic minority that aspired to separate. Azerbaijani community in the Bolnisi municipality still remembers the traumatic experience of abuse in the 1990s. Azerbaijani inhabitants of the city were physically abused and expelled by ethnic Georgians enthralled by ultra-nationalist sentiments and ideas. Azerbaijanis chose not to remember this story during the interviews since they feared that it could become a source of another conflict, or reason of alienation between them and ethnic Georgians. Ethnic Georgians also avoid talking about this incident; their narratives continue to clearly reflect the narrative “left behind” in the region by the 1990s national movement. For instance, a Svan eco-migrant from Bolnisi echoes the attitude that was common in the region in late 1980s and early 1990s: *“Azerbaijanis want autonomy, we need our flag and coat of arms, and we need to declare Marneuli as the capital”*.

Eventually the Georgian Orthodox Church became the ultimate demarcator and protector of such nationalist discourse.¹⁰ If in the 1990s, Adjara was the primary target of the Church in terms of its nationalist and missionary activities, today Kvemo Kartli also became a target. However, this time the goal was not to spread Christianity but rather to symbolically mark the region as a “Christian territory”. This was noticeable in the fact that Georgian priesthood was especially active in Kartli, and there were several instances of raising the cross in Muslim villages. Campaign videos prepared by the Kvemo Kartli governor’s administration clearly reveal how the political establishment and the Georgian state view the region.¹¹ The video does not show even one symbol or cultural artifact that would witness to the existence of ethnic Azerbaijanis in the region. It is notable that Azerbaijanis prepared an alternative campaign video which represents Kvemo Kartli culture from a more diverse lens.¹²

Respondents interviewed in the framework of the study associate changes in the politics and discourse towards the minorities with the “Rose Revolution”. They listed all those initiatives or public speeches where they were considered and acknowledged as the country’s citizens.¹³ It must be noted that respondents found the word “Tatari” used in regards to them upsetting¹⁴: “in

¹⁰ Zedania, Giga: “Nationalismus und Religion in Georgien,” Religion und Gesellschaft in Ost und West, no. 6 (2011): 16–19; Fuchslocher, Eva: Vaterland, Sprache, Glaube: Orthodoxie und Nationenbildung am Beispiel Georgiens, Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2010

¹¹ Kokoshvili, Dato. Kvemo Kartli Campaign Video from the Administration and Exclusively Georgian Statues. *Netgazeti*. <http://netgazeti.ge/news/291333/> (Accessed: 11.09.2018)

¹² “An Alternative Video Prepared in Response to Kvemo Kartli Local Government under the Leadership of Martagi Asadov”, *Marneuli Radio*. <http://marneulifm.ge/ka/marneuli/article/14131-mirthagi-asadovis-khelmdzghvanelobith-qvemo-qarthlis-guberniis-sapasukho-videorgoli-momzadda> (Accessed 11/09/2018)

¹³ President’s 2010 initiative when Novruz-Bayrami was declared as a national holiday, when financial resources were allocated for the building of mosques, etc

¹⁴ This label became commonplace in the Russian Empire and was used to denote Muslims from various ethnic groups. It implied culturally lower ethnic and cultural groups in the nineteenth century and later

the past, during Shevardnadze's times, we were called Tatars. I hated Tatars [...] then Saakashvili changed it and we were no longer called that". These words clearly reveal how important political "response" was for them.

Today, for the Azerbaijani community it is important not only to prohibit the discriminative name "Tatar" but also to recognize them as full citizens of Georgia, define their cultural and national identity, and enable their participation in political processes.

The Problem of Identity in the Kvemo Kartli Azerbaijani Community – Azerbaijanis of Georgia vs. Azeris

Lately, it is becoming increasingly more important for Georgian Azerbaijani youth to discuss their cultural and national belonging. In public discourse, we often come across the question: "Who am I? Georgian, Azerbaijani, "Azerbaijani of Georgia" or something completely different?!".

The question of Azerbaijani identity in Georgia is multi-faceted. New generation of Azerbaijanis live in a radically different reality compared to their parents and grandparents. Their socialization process involved integration politics and teaching of Georgian language. It should also be mentioned that this generation was formed in the so-called digital age. Internet, various online-platforms, social networks, and informal education represent their main source of information and education. First generation of students who were accepted in higher education institutions through "1+4" program graduated Georgian (Tbilisi) universities. Hence, it could be assumed that Azerbaijani students who became familiar with twentieth century history, Soviet history, and nationalism theories at the university, will be using this knowledge to make sense of their identity.

The ethnic minority that we refer to as Azerbaijanis or Azeris today is not a homogeneous ethnic group. Ancestors of Azerbaijanis of Georgia lived on the territory of present-day Azerbaijan, Iran, and Turkey, and their migration to Georgia can be traced back to different periods. A story shared by one of the study respondents clearly reveals that her ancestors have no connection to Azerbaijan or Iran. She knows exactly which Turkish village her ancestors came from. Hence, she does not understand why she should refer to her culture as Azerbaijani. Lately, we have often been finding the term "Azeri" in Georgian language. This was an attempt to get rid of the derogatory term "Tatar" since the latter did not suggest their connection to Turkish speaking or Turkish groups but rather was a derogatory term. It turned out that the most foreign name for Azerbaijanis of Georgia is "Azeris": "*Azeris live in Azerbaijan, they call themselves that, we are Azerbaijanis here*". Some respondents distinguished between Azerbaijanis from Azerbaijan, referring to them as "Yerazis", and Azerbaijanis from Georgia, who are in turn "Gerazis". Both old and young generations favor the labels "Azerbaijanis of Georgia" or "Georgian Azerbaijanis".

When discussing identity, we often come across the word Borchalo, which sounds different for Azerbaijanis and Georgians. The study determined Georgian disposition towards this word via internet space (social networks and forums). Here, the word was associated with the risk of separation. The word is being used in the same context by Russian propaganda information sources. Among the Azerbaijanis of Georgia, older generation has poetic or literary associations with the word, while younger generation connects it to the historical name of the district. For the latter, it is a symbol of Azerbaijani political participation during the First Republic of Georgia. Social media analysis and student interviews revealed that students consider participation of Morchalo District (party) representatives in the 1919 local government elections in the First Republic as an exemplary event.

General Historical Overview of Kvemo Kartli

Investigation of ethnic, social and political changes in Kvemo Kartli between seventeenth and twentieth century has never been a priority for Georgian historians. Only a small section of historians took interest in the region and accordingly, we only find fragmented thematic studies. There are many reasons for this phenomenon, including first and foremost absence of local historical studies in Georgia. Regions with diverse ethnic composition have no place in history. Hence, there are numerous unanswered questions regarding the past. Limited resources, lack of time, and archival challenges did not allow us to conduct a thoroughly detailed study. As a result, this study represents a general overview of major historical processes that occurred in Kvemo Kartli.

In 1604 Shah Abbas I defeated Ottomans in a battle near Yerevan, conferred Iranian villages to George X (1600-1605) and granted him a pension of 300 Toman. In return, the Georgian King handed Lore region with its castle to Shah Abbas. Abbas I settled river Debeda valley with a Turkmen called Borchalu.¹⁵ Their primary occupation was animal husbandry and herding. Historian Aleksandre Boshishvili reckons that “Bochano khanate was first subordinate to the Shah but became part of the Georgian Kingdom due to changes in land-ownership and Eli Turkmen population.”¹⁶ In 1758 Erekle II handed Borchalo Valley to Baman Khan who quickly brought back the frightened Elis¹⁷ who had escaped Kartli, and employed them in state service. In 1764 Erekle II issued a special order for the leaders of Borchalo and other groups. According to the document, the king was commanding them to take care of the Eli of Borchalo in exchange for extra protection for special advantages for the servicemen.¹⁸ As Kingdom of Kartli and Kakheti was divided into princedoms in the Erekle’s later years, Giorgi received these territories.

In 1801, Kingdom of Kartli and Kakheti was abolished by Emperor Alexander I and became part of the Russian Empire. Russian administration and new taxation system were also introduced in Borchalo. This period also marked a new wave of migrations and establishment of German colonies. Following the Russian-Georgian War, ethnic Greeks were settled in the Borchalo administrative unit. The area became more multi-ethnic yet ethnic minorities lived apart from one another and except for mundane issues, there was no ethnic conflict amongst them.

In the Russian Empire, the question of self-governance grew in prominence towards the end of the nineteenth century. For the state that was accustomed to a strictly centralized mode of government, this new stage was a challenge. Local elites were especially active in advocating self-governance. In their opinion, more attention had to be paid to the redistribution of resources and their application in accordance to local needs. However, Russian Empire was not ready for granting the right of strong self-governance. The question of self-governance became most acute in the Caucasus after the 1917 revolution. The new political elite that had been fighting for this right for decades dedicated considerable time to the question fully realizing its role and significance.

¹⁵ Aleksandre Boshishvili. *Southern Border of the Georgian Kingdom and Southern Provinces (15th to 18th Centuries)*. Tbilisi: 2015, 127

¹⁶ Ibid., 128

¹⁷ Tribe, group.

¹⁸ Boshishvili 2015, 135

With the proclamation of Georgian independence on May 26, 1918 the issue of self-governance elections re-surfaced again. Following long discussions, Borchalo district local election committee became actively involved from May 1919. The committee was based in Ekaterinefield (Bolnisi). The district was divided into five electoral constituencies. The election results reflected multi-party local life: Social Democratic Party of Georgia and “Hummet” (Energy - Azerbaijan’s Muslim Socialist Party) together¹⁹ - 8 689 (40,25 %); various non-partisan groups - 6 557 (30,37 %); Socialist-Colonists (new settlements) - 1 426 (6,6%); Georgian Socialist-Revolutionary Party - 4 637 (21,48%).²⁰ It is also notable that this system of local administration guaranteed equal participation of all ethnic groups in the local self-government of Borchalo district.

In 1918-1921 ethnic minorities were represented not only in the local self-government, but also in state establishment efforts. Hussein (Soin) Kuli-Mammed-Ogli was a deputy in the constituent assembly and actively participated in solving issues related to the problem of Muslims in various commissions.²¹ An important historical event is notable in the competition between major political parties during the election of representatives in Karaizi constituency of Tbilisi district - a Muslim woman of Azerbaijani ethnicity, Peri-Khan Sofieva became the fifth representative of Tbilisi district from Karaizi constituency.²² This was the first Muslim woman elected in the local self-government.²³

Historian Eric Lee refers to the 1918-1921 Georgian political leadership as a forgotten revolution and an experiment.²⁴ This is a fair assessment, but political projects and visions that were just starting to form could not be brought to fruition and hence, we cannot speak about their outcomes. Bolsheviks, whose leadership introduced a radically different mood in the country, ensured that the experiments of the First Republic would be forgotten.

National politics also transformed after the occupation of Georgia in 1921. The Soviet Union started to experiment in national politics, which of course directly impacted Muslim population in the Borchalo constituency. A decision made on the Twelfth Meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist Party schematically illustrates the Soviet nationalities policy. With the 1923 resolution, the Soviet government showed its utmost support for a national structure that did not come into opposition with the unitary centralized state.²⁵ The government supported national self-determination in its four forms: national territory, language, national elite and culture. Based on these categories, language of the titular autochthonous nation on a specific territory would be proclaimed as the national language. Only several nations were deemed worthy to be considered culturally developed, including Russians, Ukrainians, Georgians, Armenians, Jews and Germans who were grouped in the same category of “Western nations”.²⁶ Since Muslims living in the Borchalo constituency were not autochthonous peoples of that particular territory, they were labeled as “culturally backward”. In 1926, level of education among Borchalo population varied between the ethnic groups. Among Germans 95% were educated, Russians - 38,1 %, Armenians -

¹⁹ In the twentieth century, political parties were active within the whole South Caucasus.

²⁰ Nationhood. Local Self-Government Reform in the Georgian Republic. 1918, 173

²¹ <http://archive.ge/ka/biography/166>.

²² Gardabani district.

²³ <http://archive.ge/ka/blog/9>.

²⁴ Eric Lee. *The Experiment: Georgia's Forgotten Revolution 1918-1921*. Tbilisi 2018: 7-11

²⁵ Терри Мартин. Империя „Положительной деятельности“. Нации и Национализм в СССР, 1923-1939 г. Москва 2011, 21-2.

²⁶ Ibid., 21.

28,8 %, Georgians - 11 % and Tiurks - 3,7 %. Only 11% of the whole population was educated, meaning they possessed “basic literacy”.²⁷

Official language of the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, founded in 1922, was Russian. However, its jurisdiction included local languages of the member states: Georgian, Armenian and Tiurkish. Professor Revaz Gachechiladze explains the distinction between “Tiurks” and “Turks”: “Soviet leadership was far more fearful of Pan-Turkism than local nationalism in Turkish-speaking republics. Hence, based on the Kremlin decision, all traditionally Muslim and linguistically Tiurkish ethnicities of southern Caucasus, who were listed as “Tiurks” in the 1926 All-Union Census of the Soviet Union in order to differentiate them from “Turks”, were officially renamed as “Azerbaijanis” since 1936. For example, the 1939 All-Union Census of the Soviet Union listed all Turkish-speaking (and even some Georgian-speaking) Muslims living in Meskheta as Azerbaijanis (before, they were called “Tatars”).²⁸

Education and information transmission in the mother tongue of ethnic minorities was also strongly facilitated. According to 1935 records, 10 magazines and newspapers were published in Turkish in Georgia, and in regions with two or more ethnic minorities, newspapers were also bilingual or trilingual.²⁹ Number of Tiurks in the Communist Party was quite low. As 1936 records suggest, 25 303 Georgians, 5 007 Armenians, 3 509 Russians and 1027 Tiurks had membership in the Communist Party of Georgia.³⁰ Moreover, there were no Tiurks in the decision making body, party bureau, in Georgia. Their political representation was limited to areas densely populated by Tiurks. They were represented on the level of district committees, but their representation was low or non-existent on higher levels.

Owing to its nature, the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic dedicated considerable attention to ethnic minorities. There were national councils, which generated an illusion that the state concerned itself with the integration of ethnic minorities, especially their education. However, with the disintegration of the Federation in 1936, Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic relaxed its interest towards ethnic minorities, including Azerbaijanis.

The Soviet government faced the dilemma of choosing between territorial nationalism and individual nationalism. Georgians living in Georgia could express their individual nationalist sentiments in a designated space of language and culture. The issue was far more complex for ethnic minorities. Historian Terry Martin notes that in cases like this, Soviet government took advantage of the divergence strategy, which implied creation of national councils in small areas to allow ethnic minorities express their national sentiments. Theoretical desire turned out to be incompatible with the practical implementation. With the delineation of national territory, an individual proclaimed her ethnic loyalty.³¹ In Georgia, national councils were created, which aimed to preserve national character of minorities and ensure their political involvement within their geographic areas. Like in other Soviet Republics, we witness formation of various collective farmings and emergence of local communist elites both in villages and districts.

²⁷ Ministry of Internal Affairs Archives. Second Division. Fund 13, List 17, Case 131, 84.

²⁸ Revaz Gachechiladze. *My Twentieth Century*. Vol I. Bakur Sulakauri Publishing, 2008, 304.

²⁹ Ministry of Internal Affairs Archives. Second Division. Fund 13, List 13, Case 12, 7-13.

³⁰ Ministry of Internal Affairs Archives. Second Division. Fund 13, List 14, Case 6, 11.

³¹ Терри Мартин 2011, 49-50.

These developments explain tensions between Azerbaijanis and ethnic Georgians of Kvemo Kartli at the end of 1980s. In 1987, heavy snowfall in Svaneti triggered an economic catastrophe, which necessitated population resettlement. Soviet Georgian government chose Kvemo Kartli, densely populated by Azerbaijanis, as the destination of Svan resettlement. This decision was clearly geared towards disrupting ethnic composition of the region and indeed, according to 1989 census, 35,23 % of local population was Georgian.³² The media provided active coverage of eco migrant resettlement, and continuously emphasized that “Georgian language should be heard on the Georgian land”.³³

An open conflict occurred between Georgian and Azerbaijani youth on June 23, 1989. Physical confrontations lasted overnight. Tensions were diffused only after the arrival of militia units from Rustavi and Tbilisi. Additionally, a protest was held in Marneuli on June 24, which demanded autonomization of Kvemo Kartli with Rustavi as its capital.³⁴

Georgian Communist Party did not have a clear plan for solving the problem. Previously utilized strategy wherein propagandists and local elites held meetings on the significance of internationalism were no longer effective. In the 1980s it became popular to meet with the intelligentsia of the party and have heated discussions. There is an impression that politicians employed this space as the “last outlet” for negative dispositions accumulated in the society. In the time of tensions, the Central Committee of the Communist Party often discussed the question of ethnic Azerbaijanis. However, instead of offering political solutions, intelligentsia and part of the political elite proposed to grant them the status of internal “guests”.

As a geographical unit, Kvemo Kartli is unique due to ethnic migrations. There was a steady wave of migrations in the region starting from the seventeenth century until the end of the twentieth century. In the times of monarchy, strong loyalty from the subjects was the main concern of the king. Hence, religious beliefs and ethnic belonging of Turkish-language groups settled on the territory since 1604 was not the main priority of the king of Kartli and Kakheti. It was the level of their loyalty that took precedence. German, Greek and other ethnic minorities settled on the territory in the nineteenth century, during the Russian Empire, operated within their narrow social circles and were practically not involved in the political life of Tbilisi, the center of the province. First attempts towards their integration started between 1918 and 1921 during the local self-government elections. Entry of the Bolshevik Red Army in Georgia marked a new stage and new dispositions towards ethnic minorities. This is the time when the concept of a “titular nation” emerges, which meant that one dominant ethnic group would receive the right of political, cultural and economic domination. Hence, ethnic groups start to be segregated. This heavy historical legacy largely determined the problems associated with the integration of ethnic minorities in contemporary Georgia.

Proficiency in Georgian Language, Education, Political Participation and Integration

Modernist nationalist theories directly link the formation of national (civil) identity to education.³⁵ This study has shown that the topic of identity has been revived among the youth, especially

³² 1989 General Population Census.

³³ *Literary Georgia* 46(2670). 1988, 1.

³⁴ *Young Communist* 77(11407). 1989, 2. Georgian Archives from this period are closed, so it is impossible to receive detailed information about the filed criminal cases. There is also no information available about the lynchings that took place during the confrontations, as described by oral sources.

³⁵ Gellner, Ernst. *Nations and Nationalism*. 2003.

among those who are already receiving higher education. Hence, enhanced quality of education among minorities has a special importance. The question of education is, in turn, linked not only to the question of proficiency in the official language of the state, but also the quality of education, which aggravates social, economic and political exclusion of non-dominant ethnic groups. Although we can observe state efforts to improve education for ethnic minorities, important positive changes that would help transform the existing situation are yet to be seen.

A state reform initiated in 2009 - which introduced a system of quotas for foreign language speaking applicants (1+4 Program), can be assessed as a significant progress. Namely, since 2010 representatives of ethnic minorities have the opportunity to receive higher education in Georgia via a simplified curriculum. The simplified system, the so-called 1+4 Program, introduced general skills exams in Armenian, Azerbaijani, Abkhazian and Ossetian languages, and with sufficient scores, applicants are accepted into universities. The reform enabled ethnic minorities to receive education, increased proficiency in Georgian language and generally facilitated the process of integration. This, in turn, transformed political consciousness, and civil and social dispositions of younger generations. However, the education system continues to have significant flaws, which need to be further addressed, by the state.

Despite numerous attempts, there is no framework document that would conceptually and thoroughly analyze current situation in the field of education - challenges and possible solutions. This, in turn, would enable regulation of problems related to the education of ethnic minorities and inter-institutional coordination.³⁶

Preschool education greatly affects the quality of language instruction and education in regions populated by ethnic minorities. According to monitoring conducted by the Public Defender Council on ethnic minorities, there are no buildings for preschool education, there is no appropriate infrastructure and the number of preschool institutions is radically low in areas populated by ethnic minorities. Children's involvement in preschool education is significantly lower in areas densely populated by ethnic minorities compared to other regions; in Samtskhe-Javakheti it represents 52,6% and in Kvemo Kartli - 43,7%. There are no municipal primary schools in most of Kvemo Kartli (62 %) and Samtskhe-Javakheti (57%).

The problem of general education is acute among ethnic minorities not only in regards to Georgian language, but also in terms of the quality of education and proper competence building students.

In non-Georgian schools we find different graduation rates compared to Georgian schools. Number of students who receive average school education is significantly lower compared to Georgian-language schools. It is notable that number of school dropouts is practically the same regardless of the language of instruction up to the ninth grade.³⁷ However, in 2014-2015 and 2016-2017 academic years, the number of students in Azerbaijani-language schools dropped to 81% between eighth and tenth, and in Russian language schools it dropped to 80%. Ministry of Education and Science does not have information on the exact causes of dropping out. However, the difference in numbers according to the language of instruction indicates that non-Georgian

³⁶ Annual Report of the Public Defender, 217, 273. Available at <http://ombudsman.ge/uploads/other/5/5139.pdf>.

³⁷ Public Defender Council on Ethnic Minorities, Monitoring Results. 2017.

language schools provide insufficient conditions and motivation to continue secondary education.³⁸

Shortage of classified teachers is another problem in the regions, including the issue of aging teachers in Azerbaijani-language schools.

Despite the mentioned structural challenges, the number of students participating in “1+4” Program grows annually.³⁹ The study also confirmed that graduates continue their education in Tbilisi higher education institutions. Considering current level of Georgian language instruction in secondary schools, admission to higher education institutions would have taken much longer without such concessionary programs. As we know, in the past, Azerbaijanis from Kvemo Kartli traveled to Azerbaijan or Russia to receive higher education. However, there is no memory of anybody going to Azerbaijan for education in the past few years.

The study also revealed unanimous consensus in the Azerbaijani community regarding the need of knowing Georgian language. Of course, we also find generational differences in terms of the level of proficiency. Middle-aged respondents suggest that they do not quite speak Georgian, but their children do. Among the youth, school students say that they know Georgian unlike their parents. As one Azerbaijani student noted, young people know that they need the language to receive education and also because the country’s official language is Georgian. Their parents’ generation, on the other hand, looks at the issue in a more pragmatic light and associates proficiency in Georgian language with career and economic advancement.

As the study showed, both school and university students value informal education. If the Ministry of Education supports informal education programs in the region, this would increase motivation among Azerbaijani students to know Georgian, which would in turn prepare them for university education and ensure their adaptation. It is also notable that there is low awareness of “1+4” Program in the region. This depends on the efforts of individual students or teachers. There are no systematic information campaigns or other mechanisms in Kvemo Kartli, especially in villages. Respondents confirmed positive disposition towards military duties. There is also a high demand for competitive sports, and opening of functioning municipal sports halls in the regions.

The determination of ethnically Azerbaijani youth to learn Georgian and receive education reveals their readiness for political engagement. However, all young respondents noted that their motivation disappears when they see that the state does not value Georgian-speaking and educated Azerbaijanis. “They would prefer to have people who don’t speak Georgian in the parliament and local assemblies, who do not understand what is being discussed and only know that they have to push a button to vote” - these and other comments reveal that young people are passively disposed to transformations in the region; regardless of their ethnic belonging, they also critically assess political negotiations and corruption.⁴⁰

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Admission of non-Georgian language students through the “1+4 Program” by years: 2010 - 247 students, 2011 - 589, 2013 - 890, 2014 - 673, 2015 - 741, 2016 - 960, 2017 - 1047

⁴⁰ “Competition over the Votes of Ethnic Minorities in Georgia: 2017 Local Elections, Political Study”. Center for the Studies of Ethnicity and Multiculturalism. 2018

Rates of political participation among ethnic minorities on the level of central government is noticeably low. It should be added that there has been a decline in the representation of national minorities in the parliament since the 90s. In 2016, representation of national minorities in the parliament equaled 11 deputies (7,3%) when their number in the general population reached 13,2%. According to ECMI data, lowest participation was recorded in the 1992-1995 parliament - 4 deputies, and in the years 1996-1999 and 1999-2004 the number of national minority representatives reached 16. In 2008-2012, there were 6 national minority deputies, in 2012 - 8, and in 2016 – 11.⁴¹ It is notable that the local community often argues that their representatives in the parliament do not participate in political debates, and parties often select ethnic minority representatives who do not have sufficient education and proficiency in Georgian language, which reinforces public image of ethnic minorities as passive and not proficient in Georgian.⁴²

Historical experience reveals that regions populated by ethnic minorities show strong support for the ruling party. Possible causes of such voting behavior are sense of security acquired through the of loyalty to the government and the desire to maintain status-quo on the one hand, and fear of the government and influence of law-enforcement institutions on electoral decision-making.⁴³ After the 2016 elections, more support for the political opposition was recorded.⁴⁴ Locals often note that, as a rule, political parties show more active interest in them and their activities during the election season. They do not hold proper pre-election campaigns and generally, their political programs and agenda do not dedicate sufficient attention to issues related to the integration of ethnic minorities.

Situation in Kvemo Kartli is also dire in terms of employment in the public sector. Although in Marneuli, Bolnisi, Dmanisi and Gardabani ethnic minorities represent the majority, their employment in the public sector is not proportional of the number of Azerbaijanis living in the municipality.⁴⁵

As might be expected, against the background of emerging critical political consciousness and behavior among the youth, low political participation and engagement of ethnic minorities generates a sense of alienation and frustration, which demands timely response and revised policies on the part of the state.

Regional Actors in Kvemo Kartli - Soft Power or Cultural Ties?!

Religion is not a presiding factor in the cultural and political ties of Azerbaijanis living in Georgia since the latter often do not coincide with the dominant religious culture of neighboring countries. Few scholarly works are available on religious practice and culture of Azerbaijanis living in Kvemo Kartli. As this study has shown, description of a clear religious picture is also complicated by the

⁴¹ You can find more information on the representation of ethnic minorities in the parliament at http://csem.ge/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Infographics_minorities-in-parliament_Geo.pdf.

⁴² http://csem.ge/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Infographics_minorities-in-parliament_Geo.pdf.

⁴³ Political Study on the Integration of National Minorities in Georgia. Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD). 2017. "Electoral Systems and National Minorities. K. Margvelashvili and A. Tsiklauri.

⁴⁴ See "Competition over the Votes of Ethnic Minorities in Georgia: 2017 Local Elections, Political Study". Center for the Studies of Ethnicity and Multiculturalism. 2018.

⁴⁵ For example, according to a report of the Public Defender Council on Ethnic Minorities (2017), from 217 employees in the Marneuli administration office only 74 are Azerbaijanis. In Kvemo Kar. tli, Azerbaijanis primarily occupy the position of deputy head of the local assembly and administration

fact that local population is often not cognizant of their religious affiliation - whether they are Shiites or Sunnis. Research conducted for this study suggests that overall, level of religious practice within the community is low; this indicator also differs from generation to generation. Religiosity is primarily expressed in the celebration of holidays, which are simultaneously part of religion, culture and tradition (Kurban Bayram, Novruz Bayram). Older generation does not practice religion as strictly as the new generation. However, there is also a tendency among the youth to identify as Muslim but not perform religious rituals. As such, religious environment within the community is quite complex.

Concerning the role of neighboring countries and their image in Kvemo Kartli, one can identify two kinds of attitudes towards **Azerbaijan**.⁴⁶ Respondents did not reveal a high level of loyalty or belonging towards the population of Azerbaijan. A novel finding of the study was that Azerbaijan emerged as a neighboring country rather than a historical motherland (“Why are they congratulating me for the 100th anniversary of Azerbaijani independence, on May 26th I celebrated my country’s independence”). Azerbaijanis of Georgia are not trying to embellish or justify what they see in Azerbaijan. Youth is either not interested in the affairs of Azerbaijan (“*I don’t watch Azerbaijani channels... They always talk about Karabakh*”), or they criticize the political regime for being authoritarian. Although Azerbaijan was one of the major actors in the region from the 1990s (financially, politically, and culturally), critical attitudes towards the country’s internal politics can also be found among the older generation.

Among regional actors, economic, religious and cultural activities of **Turkey** in Kvemo Kartli are most perceptible. On a micro level, one of the indicators of changing orientation from Azerbaijan to Turkey is the popularity of Turkish TV channels. Locals believe that Azerbaijani channels are uncritical towards the country’s governing party and leader, while Turkish channels are more diverse. Turkish channels (i.e. TRT Diyanet) and online media actively cover political situation in Turkey; they also popularize historical programs (about the territories of the Ottoman Empire, Turkish culture, etc).⁴⁷ Older generation possesses considerable information about political events in Turkey. The study shows that if locals criticize Azerbaijan - for example, the fact that Aliyev has been in power for years or that one could be arrested for her political critique, they do not assess the situation in Turkey in a similar manner. Older generation likes Erdogan, especially his religious policies. The “footprint” of Turkey in the region is also perceptible in strong ties with religious organizations. The majority of madrasas in Marneuli and Gardabani were established by religious organizations active in Turkey. Greater part of the madrasas is Sunni despite the fact that there are more Shiites in the region. These madrasas and mosques enable young people to travel to Turkey for theological education. This choice is largely determined by the fact that they can study in Turkey for free and work simultaneously.

Conclusion

The conducted research revealed a process of new identity construction among the Azerbaijani community in Georgia. For community representatives the issue of identity remains open and unresolved. Search for cultural and national identity operates within the limits of civil nationalism. Azerbaijani community considers it important that their “primary identity” is Georgian citizenship,

⁴⁶ In this study, respondents always exclusively referred to Azerbaijanis living in Azerbaijan as “Azeris”, never using the same label for Azerbaijanis of Georgia.

⁴⁷ A follow up study could examine “neo-Ottomanism” and Pan-Turkism in Georgia. This study only tangentially covers the topic.

and they show their readiness for that. They accept forms of “Georgianness” and Georgian nationalism that are not limited to the Georgian ethnic group and Orthodox Christianity. Azerbaijanis of Georgia express the desire and readiness to belong to Georgia as a political entity. The study findings reveal the desire of the Azerbaijani community to be part of the Georgian national project. These circumstances need to be positively utilized by the Georgian state and other sectors in order to ensure integration and reinforcement of the community.

This process of identity construction is essentially an accumulation of social factors and could be considered as an outcome of long-term integration and education policy. Statement from an Azerbaijani youth from Marneuli is an illustration of the identity formula prominent in the young generation: *“I visited Baku recently and when I returned and crossed the Red Bridge, I was the happiest person in the world. I was born in Georgia, my parents were born in Georgia, so this place is my motherland”*.

The study showed that improvements in education and proficiency in Georgian language had a direct impact on the community’s civil consciousness and political participation. In addition, we are discovering a new process of education and formation of critical knowledges in the young generation. The majority of school graduates today continue their education in Georgian universities. This concessionary politics had a positive impact on the motivation and choice to continue education. At this point, there is no alternative to the “1+4” Program and it needs to continue operating.⁴⁸ The program succeeded in not only orienting students towards Georgian universities, but also motivating them to continue education.

Yet general education policy remains a challenge in Kvemo Kartli, and we are not seeing radical signs of improvement in this regard.

Political participation of ethnic Azerbaijanis in the central and local government is weak and often nominal in nature, which could become the cause of deep social frustration for younger generation. Young people are eager to return to the region, work in the public sector, yet they also see that state policy in Kvemo Kartli is geared towards methods of control and submission, which will hinder the community’s integration in the future. Now that we detect increasing interest in the community to learn Georgian and be politically and socially engaged, and weakening emotional bonds with Azerbaijan, it is particularly important to bolster civil and political integration of the local community. Nowadays party reach in the region is weak since political parties do not address challenges related to ethnic minority integration in their agendas.

Today, issues of education, political participation and cultural identity construction are interrelated in the Azerbaijani community. Recent construction of a new identity could become a facilitator for the integration of local community. However, while Azerbaijanis living in Georgia perceive themselves as part of Georgia’s political and national space, we do not find the same sentiments in ethnically Georgian population. Integration does not work as a one-sided process. It needs to be based on “recognition politics”, and consolidating and inclusive political idea of the Georgian state. Only this would make it possible to eradicate political, economic and cultural exclusion of the Azerbaijani community.

⁴⁸ Introduction of the system of quotes was determined by the law on education as a temporary policy that would operate between 2010 to 2018-2019 academic year.

Recommendations

To the Georgian State and Relevant Institutions

Issues of Political Participation

- The issue of **political participation** of ethnic minorities should become a priority in political agenda and significant steps need to be taken on central and local levels to facilitate their representation and true participation;
- When developing integration policy social, political and cultural transformations described in the study should be taken into consideration, and utilized in order to facilitate integration;
- The government, as well as local self-governments, need to encourage employment of ethnic minorities in the public sector via internships, trainings and Georgian language programs.

Issues of Education Policy

- A study should be prepared about the quality of education, teacher qualification and school processes in non-Georgian language schools in order to identify specific problems and develop relevant policies;
- An ethnic minority education policy document should be developed along with a needs- and research-based measurable action plan oriented towards long-term social changes;
- When considering textbook standards and developing textbooks cultural and religious diversity need to be taken into consideration and represented fairly. Texts should be built on the principle of equality and critical historical analysis;
- Awareness should be increased about concessionary policy (“1+4”) enabling school graduates to continue their education at universities via information campaigns.
- Non-Georgian language and “1+4” Program students should be encouraged to choose teachers and education programs;
- The Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports should support informal education in schools. For this, they should consider past experience regarding cultural-educational activities that were especially effective;
- The Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports should initiate and support education programs aimed at improving proficiency in Georgian language, integration and cultural diversity.
- Active steps should be taken to search and identify new human resources in the process of encouraging and supporting **young professionals**.
- Sports schools/halls should be established/supported in the region due to strong interest and motivation.

Issues of Cultural Self-Sufficiency

- Historical memory of Azerbaijani community and cultural context of the region should be taken into consideration when giving names to villages, streets, squares and other public spaces to ensure that Azerbaijani culture is not disregarded;
- Public library system and public infrastructure should be rebuilt and popularized on the level of municipalities and villages.

To Local Self-Governments

- Employment of members of ethnic minorities and their appointment to leading political posts should increase in local self-government offices of Kvemo Kartli;

- Active participation of local population should be ensured when implementing local policies through the solution of the language barrier among others (translation of public information into languages of the minorities; providing interpreters, etc);
- Engagement, participation and employment of young people in local offices and policies should increase.

To Political Parties

- Content oriented towards consolidation, inclusion, acceptance and respect for ethnic minorities should proliferate in the rhetoric of **political parties** and other groups;
- Party activities should grow in regions densely populated by ethnic minorities reflecting the needs of the minorities, their concerns and issues related to their rights;
- When developing party member ratios ethnic diversity of Georgia should be taken into account and participation of minority groups in politics should be maximally supported.

To Media Outlets

- When covering political, cultural and social life of Kvemo Kartli, cultural and religious diversity should be encouraged;
- Media interest in social and political challenges faced by the region should be heightened, and their local work should be better organized.

To Universities and Other Academic Institutions

- Critical studies and academic discussions related to the history and current situation of ethnic minorities should be encouraged;
- Information about “1+4” Program should be effectively spread in public schools and among high school graduates. Local specificities, needs and challenges should be considered in the process of communication;
- Universities should multiply positive programs of multicultural and civil education for students from both ethnic minority and majority.