

Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC)

Crisis of Secularism and Loyalty towards the Dominant Group

The Role of the Government in the 2012-2013 Religious Conflicts in Georgia

ადამიანის უფლებების სწავლებისა და მონიტორინგის ცენტრი

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Tbilisi 2013



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Policy, Advocacy, and Civil Society Development in Georgia (G-PAC)

საჯარო პოლიტიკის, ადვოკატირებისა და სამოქალაქო საზოგადოების
განვითარება საქართველოში

The project is implemented in the framework of The East-West Management Institute’s (EWMI) Policy, Advocacy, and Civil Society Development in Georgia (G-PAC) Program, funded by United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

The project is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the USAID.

The content is the responsibility of Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC) and does not necessarily reflect the view of USAID, the United States Government, or EWMI.

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Print run: 500 copies

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Introduction

The presented research was conducted by Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC) with the financial support of the East-West Management Institute, Inc. (within the framework of - Policy, Advocacy and Civil Society Development in Georgia – G-PAC). The research aims to study the causes of the religious conflicts in the villages of Nigvziani (Lanchkhuti district), Tsintskaro (Tetrtskaro district) and Samtatskaro (Dedoplistskaro district); as well as to analyze government policies enacted to the peaceful and just resolution of the conflicts. In addition, the research formulates recommendations to the central government to solve the existing problems and to prevent similar conflicts in the future. The research is examining religious conflicts in the broad dynamic and analyzes the social and political contexts that were influencing and conditioning it

The paper presents a detailed narrative of the religious conflicts that unfolded in Nigvziani, Tsintskaro and Samtatskaro. This includes a review of conflict history and its dynamics, as well as the assessments of the current situation in the conflict zones, the causes of the conflict and the role of the government, religious actors, non-governmental organizations and the media (Chapters 2, 3, and 4).

The narrative descriptions in the research are followed by an analysis of the religious conflicts. Chapter 5, specifically, evaluates government policies enacted in order to peacefully and justly resolve the conflicts in the villages of Nigvziani, Tsintskaro and Samtatskaro. To evaluate the government's role we were guided by the principles of efficiency, fairness and secularism. Chapter 6 gives an overview of general recommendations by EMC to the central and local governments on the necessary measures that need to be taken to eradicate the causes of the conflict and to prevent those and similar cases from happening again. The recommendations are given to the relevant institutions separately.

1. Research objective and methodology

The methodology was determined by the nature of the research object and the aims of the research itself. The aim of the research was to reveal the causes, at the local and macro level, which contributed to the initiation of religious conflicts, or conditioned them.

1.1. Research objective

In the short period following the parliamentary elections of October 2012 in Georgia, several local religious conflicts in different geographical zones unfolded and created the need to further examine these in a broader perspective. Despite the fact that government officials kept referring to conspiracy theories or claiming the conflicts were artificial and not admitting the reality of the problems at hand, initial observations of the conflicts showed they were not sporadic, but rather the result of systematical problems relating to the protection of freedom of religion within the country (this, in the end, was also proved through this research). The perceptions and attitudes of the different religious groups in the conflict were leading to alienation among the local Christian and Muslim communities. Consequently, it proved to be necessary to study the conflicts locally and in a broad perspective.

In addition, *prima facie* evaluations of the development of the conflict and of the policies enacted to solve it showed that, in the case of the first conflict, the unjust and non-secular policies of the government determined the spreading of the conflict to other regions and expanded the restriction of freedom rights further. In light of recent developments in Georgia¹, the claims of losing the balance between the Church and the state have acquired more empirical evidence and gained special importance in the course of the analysis of the above-mentioned conflicts. This imbalance was demonstrated when the government failed to respond adequately to the violations, and when it trusted and delegated the conflict resolution function to the religious actors.

Consequently, the aim of the proposed research is to study state policies enacted with regard to the religious conflicts, and to learn about the extent in which the government was respecting equality and the freedom of religion in acting within the frameworks of secularism when dealing with different religious conflicts on the one hand, and on the other hand to analyze the social, political and cultural environment of the local communities which influenced the initiation of the conflict.

The research, however, does not aim to check the genuineness of the theories proposed by different political forces saying the conflicts were artificially inflated. Even if this was the case, it is obvious that the underlying problems of the conflicts regarding the protection of the principles of freedom of religious, secularism and tolerance are systematic.

¹ This refers to the counter-manifestation organized by the church on the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia, May 17, and the demolition of a Minaret in the village Chela, Adigeni Municipality, as well as the usage of disproportionate force against local Muslims by the police.

1.2. Research methodology

1.2.1. Instruments for collecting empirical data

The research is based on a critical discourse analysis of documentary materials gathered during the conflict, as well as in-depth interviews with the major actors of the conflict (representatives of local government, clergy men, public school administration) conducted by the project team. Accordingly, the research methods used are qualitative methods.

The research consists of two time frames. The period of the actual conflict and the period following the resolution/conservation of it. The latter marks the change in the position of parties which can be explained by the re-evaluation of expectations and rationalization of the processes by the parties involved.

When conducting the interviews EMC made sure there was a religious, regional and gender balance. Many more respondents were interviewed than the number of those given in this research paper amounts to. In some cases the responses were substantially coinciding with previous interviews which led to the researchers not documenting such interviews anymore. The total number of the respondents interviewed (approximately 25 people in each village) was enough to generalize our evaluations. The number of interviewees from both parties in the conflict is almost equal.

During the course of the research EMC managed to conduct interviews with local Christian clergymen but, the Georgian Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church (hereinafter the Patriarchate) several times refused to make an official statement on their stance on the religious conflicts.

In addition to the interviews, video and printed press materials, EMC also used public statements made by different government officials during the course of the conflict, stenographic records from meetings as well as public information requested from the government entities, and the assessments made by the Public Defender and non-governmental organizations to conduct this research.

The research is founded on statements made by the conflict parties and other major actors, and shows the basic tendencies in their attitudes and perceptions. The research has fully studied the facts connected to significant episodes of the conflict and its development. Although it is obvious the research has not conducted a study of each fact mentioned by the parties during the separate interviews. The criteria for including such facts were their reiteration by other respondents, their symptomatic character with respect to the general tendencies revealed during the study, or the fact that they included subjective perceptions significant to specific individuals.

1.2.2. Description of the study performed in Nigvziani, Tsintskaro and Samtskaro

i. The description of the study performed in the village Nigvziani

The field work in the village of Nigvziani was conducted during June-July 2013, some 7-8 months after the conflict occurred. The research team had no opportunity to directly observe the process and the analysis of the mentioned period is fully based on video and press materials provided by media outlets. Statements of the following people were used as proof and actual text material in this research: the village trustee, the school principal and deputy principal, two school teachers, the local priest, the local Khoja, Mufti governance representative, three local Christians, 7 local Muslims

ii. Description of the study performed in the village Tsintskaro

The researchers have directly observed the religious conflict taking place in the village of Tsintskaro and gathered many video recordings portraying the conflict. The second stage of research was conducted during May 2013, some 6 months after the conflict was initiated. When making the conflict assessment in Tsintskaro the research directly used and paraphrased the detailed interviews with: the village trustee, two school teachers, Mufti governance representatives, the local Khoja, Manglisi and Tsalka Eparchy Metropolitans, nine local Christians and eight local Muslims .

iii. Description of the study performed in the village Samtatskaro

Our team of researchers was on the spot when the conflict in Samtatskaro erupted and managed to gather a lot of documentary material. The second stage of the research was conducted in October 2013, 3 months after the conflict ended. The research text uses the statements by the following people: the local Khoja, Suliko Khozrevanidze and his wife, principal and deputy principal of the Samtatskaro public school, the regional governance trustee, Dedoplistkaro Municipality City Council deputy, the local priest, six Muslims and six local Christians.

1.2.3. Instruments used for the processing the empirical data theoretically

The empirical data gathered throughout the research allowed us to reconstruct the events during the religious conflicts. After restoring the conflict narrative a discourse analyses of the statements by the interviewees, the information spread by the media outlets and the public statements by the government officials was made. The results were assessed according to the legal standards of the country obligations with respect to freedom of religion.

Throughout the preparations of the recommendations proposed to the government, we studied reports and statements on religious freedoms in the country by the Public Defender's Office, different international organizations and non-governmental organizations.

2. Review of the religious conflict in Nigvziani Village

2.1. Social and religious composition of Nigvziani Village

Nigvziani is a part of the Guria region and is situated in the Lanchkhuti Municipality. The village has some 1,300 families. The majority of the population consists of Orthodox Christians who are followers of the Orthodox Church.

Around 35 percent of the population are eco-migrants who resettled from the mountainous region of Adjara in 1970. A large number of the population in Adjara identify themselves as 'Georgian Adjarians', however, some Adjarians were converted to Christianity. Eco-migrants after resettling in Adjara, managed to integrate into the local community and engage in economic activities. Moreover, Adjarians managed to form neighborly relations with the local population. There have been some mixed marriages; however, a deep analysis of their interaction showed that the social and economic differences have drawn these communities apart. Apparently, alienation has not been openly manifested prior to the conflict (see the Chapters 2.3.3 - 2.3.5).

2.2 Timeline of the conflict and its dynamics

2.2.1. First religious conflict in 2010

Until 2010 there were no religious grounds for the conflict between the Christian and Muslim Communities living in Nigvziani. However, a closer look at these communities, after the conflict reveals some negative trends.

In 2010, the local Muslim Community decided to open a prayer house as there was neither a place for them to worship in Nigvziani, nor in adjacent villages. Muslims often had to travel to Batumi or Kobuleti to attend prayers. At the same time, members of the Muslim Community in Nigvziani maintained that they could not travel to these cities as often as they would like, due to a shortage of money and other resources. Therefore, after settling in Nigvziani, the Muslim Community said that they felt a need to open a prayer house in the village.

Their desire, however, was met by some resistance from the local Christians and local authorities, as they barred Muslims to build the prayer house. A member of the Muslim Community recalls:

[..] We wanted to build a small mosque, Gogvadze [Giorgio Gogvadze, Head of Lanchkhuti Municipality] was brought and they made us dismantle the mosque right after we had already laid the foundation. Local people came and told us that we could not build it.

Another Muslim claims the same:

Gogvadze told us, we needed to get an authorization from the government to start constructions. He told us to go and sit in our houses and pray there as much as we pleased. He also said that people did not want to built the mosque and that he would not have allowed religious conflicts between Gurians and Adjarians.

According to the local Mufti, Badri Kakhadze, Giorgi Gogvadze offered the Municipality transportation to Kobuleti, in exchange for a mosque in Nigvziani. According to Kakhidze, Gogvadze stated that: “The purpose of our work is to convert you into Christianity, as far as I am a head of a local council, there never has been nor will there be a mosque”. This conflict on religious grounds, that occurred in 2010 have not really been made public and these findings were discovered through research.

2.2.2. Second religious conflict revealed in October-November of 2012.

The second conflict on religious grounds became apparent on October 26, 2012, when during the Bayram celebrations, 150 members of the Christian Community have blocked the way of Muslims returning from prayers. Members of the local Christian Community demanded to dismantle the prayer house. The prayer house that was opened two month ago hosted around 50-70 Muslims regularly. According to the Muslims, decision to open the prayer house was made by the Mufti governance and local Municipality. On the 25 of October, 2012 neighboring villagers joined the Nigviani Muslim Community in celebrating Bayram together at the local prayer house. The first day of the celebration was peaceful, however, on October 26, Christian residents of the village blocked the roads to the visiting worshipers and barred them from visiting the village again. The conflict led to a verbal assault. According to Muslim witnesses the police was around, but did not try to stop Christians from assaulting Muslim residents.

On 2012, hundreds of Christian village residents were gathered near Badri Kakhadze’s house to protest against the construction of the prayer house. Media outlets reported that that the local Christian residents were aggressive and their statements contained threats against the local Muslim Community. Here are some of the statements made by the Christian residents:

[..] Even if I stop, youngsters won’t stop, they say they will do worse things than the things that were done in Abkhazia. The only possible way out is to stop construction of the Mosque (local Christian resident: Manana Gogichaishvili).

[..] This will not happen, if my religion requires, I will cut someone’s throat. How can I allow a Turk to mess up and change the history of my village? It will not happen (local Christian resident: Gocha Chkartinshvili).

We won’t allow the Mosque in the village, I am afraid of Friday morning, I am afraid that something bad will happen (local Christian resident: Soso Apkhazava).

There will be a murder and no one will prevent it, they [the authorities] shall pay attention to us, they shall use the police, they shall intervene and the local municipalities also shall step in. There will be a very bad situation here (local Christian residents: Gela Tugushi).²

The gathering of Christian residents was also attended by local pupils, including the children of the Muslim Adjarians. In her interview to the media, one teacher said that they could not stop the pupils

² Netgazeti, 01.11.2012 <http://netgazeti.ge/GE/105/News/14303/>

from joining the cause, and that the children were coming to express their position in support of the unity of Gurian and Adjarian residents³.

On the same day, some of the Christian residents intruded on the territory of the prayer house. Kakhadze has urged that he would not allow mosques to exist in Georgian village. The video footage demonstrates the aggression the local Christian residents had, which is reflected in their behavior and statements.⁴

On 2 November, the Georgian Mufti travelled to Nigvziani to enquire about the situation, but was barred from entering the prayer house.⁵ The conflict receded after an agreement has been reached between the leaders of the religious community and the local Municipality. According to the local clergy, Father Saba Zhghenti, Mufti had promised to take the opinion of the local residents into consideration and submit his decision in a week. In his comments, the Father added that he hoped the Mufti would make a decision “*in favor of Gurians and the Orthodox Christians*”. He said that he shared the frustration of the local Christian residents about the visiting Muslims from neighboring villages and demanded that they stop their frequent prayers.⁶

A policeman, who was called on the incident’s regard, did not stop the local Christians from engaging in unlawful acts. At the same time, the local Christians addressed the police with a joint statement demanding the police to protect their rights.⁷ The media, several representatives of the Public Defender’s Office, and members of the local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were in the village too on November 2.

The trustee of the territorial unit of Nigvziani Village, *Irakli Gujabidze*, and the acting head of Lanchkuti Municipality, *Kakha Oskurava*, were also present in the village at the day of the incident. According to Irakli Gujabidze the local self-government would support the decision of the majority. He was against other Muslims visiting Nigvziani to worship.⁸ According to Oskurava, it was important not let the conflict escalate. He admitted that freedom of religion is protected by the Constitution, however, owing to the sensitive nature of the issue, it was important to open a dialogue between the religious leaders.⁹

The head of the Committee on Human Rights and Integration of the Parliament of Georgia, *Eka Beselia*, did also visit the village on November 2. Eka Beselia emphasised that there has not been any conflict on religious grounds in Nigvziani, but only a divergence of opinions but that these dispute always remained ethical. According to Beselia, Muslims’ rights in the village have not been violated, and the protection of one right shall not lead to the violation of another right. She also stated that there was a necessity to strike a balance and agree on the rules of co-habitation between the two communities. Eka Beselia

³ Info 9, 02. 11.2013 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BooFrPXeOho>

⁴ Channel 9, 30.10.2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=raZG2WIOM10>

⁵ Negazeti, 02.11.2013, <http://netgazeti.ge/GE/105/News/14326/>

⁶ Info 9, 02. 11.2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BooFrPXeOho>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid.

commented: “We have a very tolerant approach; however, it goes without saying that the orthodox Christians also have their right and it should be possible to agree on these things.”¹⁰

The Georgian President¹¹ and the Secretary of General Security¹² commented on the conflict in Nigvziani. The Georgian President described the conflict as provoked and urged the government members to visit the village and address the issues.

On November 3, Beselia met the members of the Office of the Public Defender of Georgia and other members of the Christian and Muslim denomination. Beselia, reiterated her views on the conflict in Nigvziani and indicated that the occurring meeting was being held by the blessings of the Patriarch.¹³

Later on, Joseph, the Shemoqmedi Eparchy Metropolitan announced the results of the meetings and had the following announcement:

*We had a meeting at the Patriarchate, their representative... What's his name? Mufti, right? [...] anyways, we agreed during the negotiations that they will not bring residents of other villages here, neither from Khulo nor from Batumi. [...] and that they won't have the wish to have a mosque, god forbid, this is the promise they gave us, let's see how they are going to keep it.*¹⁴

According to Father Saba, at the meeting in the Patriarchate, they agreed that the decision would be made in favor of the majority. The Father maintained: “if the decision is not in favor of the majority, it will be very difficult to control these people”.¹⁵

The Nigvziani Conflict has been a topic of discussion at the Committee of Human Rights and Civil Integration which included Mufti, members of the office of the Public Defender of Georgia and of religious denominations. It was decided that Muslims would continue to pray in their prayer houses. After the end of the meeting, the minority party within the Parliament has expressed their discontent regarding the conflict assessment and criticized the Committee for inadequately assessing it and not condemning the incident.¹⁶

On November 5, The Minister of Justice of Georgia, Tea Tsulukiani, commented on the conflict in Nigvziani and maintained that at first the Georgian church should have been given an opportunity to settle the conflict. The Minister said:

If there are some elements of crime detected, an investigation will be started right away; yet before that, in order to avoid conflict escalation, which can potentially have fatal consequences, we are following a completely different path from the previous government. We do not intend to

¹⁰ Channel 9, 30.10.2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=raZG2WI0M10>

¹¹ Official video of the President of Georgia, 02.11.2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vqC0HfuwLQ>

¹² Statement of the Georgian National Security Council, 02.11.2012, <http://www.nsc.gov.ge/geo/news.php?id=6227>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Info 9, 07.11.2013 <http://info9.ge/?l=G&m=1000&id=8877>

¹⁵ 24 Hours, 03.11.2013, <http://24saati.ge/index.php/category/news/2012-11-03/33475>

¹⁶ The report prepared by the Public Broadcasting, 05.11.2013, <http://1tv.ge/news-view/43674>

*use force until all civilized measures are exhausted. We are confident that we will not need to use the power.*¹⁷

On November 9, the traditional prayers were held peacefully in Nigvziani Village. However, on the same day, the local Christian residents erected a Christian cross in the centre of the village, near to the prayers house.¹⁸

2.2.3. Current situation in Nigvziani village

After the conflicts that occurred in October and November of 2012 in Nigvziani, around 100-120 Muslims have been gathering to worship together with other regularly visiting Muslims. Despite the traumatic past and the religious conflict, Muslims positively assessed the fact that after so many years, they were able to open a prayer house.

However, a careful analysis of the statements made by the Christian and Muslim Communities, as well as, that of the local government, demonstrates that the achieved agreement between these parties is quite fragile. Local Christians are unhappy about the way the conflict was resolved and do not exclude the possibility that it might erupt again. In this light, local Christian residents made the following statement:

Now, after the situation has been regulated and Muslims have been given the opportunity to pray, they started to look at us from above and give us a triumphant look; [...] today people are silent, but a time will come when they will explode, they will soon become impatient and will complete what we have started.

The deputy head of the Lanchkhuti Municipality governor states that to his mind the conflict was only frozen and many things remained unsettled. The principal of the school elaborates on the reasons for re-escalating the conflict:

Everything shall remain unchanged, as it is now, if there are any additional requests, I am sure the conflict will worsen. Setting up the Minaret will aggravate the situation. Also, Muslim visitors from other villages shall stop coming.

After the aggression of local Christian Community, Muslims are also afraid that the agreement may fail. One Muslim woman, in her interview stated the following:

I think that even now they do not want us to pray, Ramadan will start soon and we will see what will happen. There has been some peace after November, but I have been verbally abused on number of occasions and I was thanking god that my husband was not around.

According to the Muslim Community, defaming treatment from the Christians persist. One of the Muslim prayers recalls:

¹⁷ news.ge, 05.11.2012, <http://news.ge/ge/news/story/36114-tsulukiani-nigvzianshi-dzalis-demonstireba-ar-dagvchirdeba>

¹⁸ Gurianews, 09.11.2012, <http://www.gurianews.com/home/2010-11-25-16-58-05/6473-2012-11-09-14-01-25.html>

[After the conflict], very close to my village, one man made a bell for his son. His parents were actively engaged in the conflict, [...] every time he sees us passing by, or us working on the land, he comes and rings the bell. They want to drive us crazy. One day, during the Friday prayers, Gurians turned on the music very loudly, gave the kids some whistles, and they have been whistling during the prayers.

A thorough analysis of the research shows that on an everyday level, these two communities have become alienated from each other. A 25 year old Muslim boy said:

They do not say anything bad about me; however, we no longer have the same type of relationship as we used to have. There is some distance between us.

The situation of B. Karadzie's family is especially tough, since the Christian Community finds him responsible for escalating the conflict. At the interview given to the researcher, Kakhadze's wife said:

Now the situation seems calmer on the surface, but it feels different to my family. When we greet them, they say that we have messed up the situation in the village and that they do not need our greetings, it seems as if we have been ostracized.

Despite these hidden religious conflicts, some of the Muslims and Christians hope that throughout the period, the situation will get better and that the Christian and Muslim Community will be able to co-exist peacefully.

2.3. The assessment of the reasons for the conflict

The assessments of the causes of the conflict differ, are complex and allow generalization in broader context.

The statements made by the parties, as well as their perceptions are irrational and controversial, which indicates that the reasons for the conflict have deeper roots. The analysis of the interviews with both, the Christian and Muslim Communities, shows that intolerance and alienation was always peculiar to the relations between communities, although the attitudes always remained latent up until the open confrontation. One of the Muslims said in his interview that:

This conflict has showed us the true faces of people, how can you start hating a person in a day? That means that they actually hated us for years. [...] one teacher said that she was not happy that she lived next to us.

Another Muslim woman recalled the following: "Before the conflict, I did not feel like I was different from others, but I felt that they did not like that we were wearing a headscarf". According to another Muslim woman: "When they evicted us many years ago, they already hated us, they did not want anyone else to live in the village, and they hated foreigners, not only Adjarians but everyone in general, but they hate us more. They do not view us as Georgians. Once they called me a 'Tatar'".¹⁹

¹⁹ Derogatory address to a Muslim

The analysis below explores the underlying reasons for the conflict.

2.3.1. Political context of the conflict

The analysis of the interviews with the Muslim and Christian Communities suggests various political interests, which may have led to the conflict.

The analysis of the interviews recorded from the Christian Community of the village shows that it explains the conflict with existence of different political interests. The local Christians explain the conflict with two main political theories. The first theory is connected to the elections, the opening of the prayer house before the elections and the promises the previous government has given to the Muslim Community, whilst the second is linked to the threat of expansion of Turkish policies.

According to the first theory, the local Christians maintain that the United National Movement Party (UNM), in exchange of their electoral votes, promised Muslim residents to open the prayer house. An interview with the local teacher of economics serves as a good example:

The researcher: *Didn't the trustee Gogvadze tell them during the previous government, that they would not be allowed to build a mosque?*

The interviewer: *Yes, that is how it was, he told them that a mosque would never be built here. If they wanted to pray, he would arrange a mini-van to take them to Batumi for prayers. But the members of the UNM could have been seen with the Mufti, yet in the pre-election period, as they were making Muslims swear on the Quran they would vote for their party.*

Other local Christians also confirmed this theory:

This is politics, however much we talk about this, it is evident that before the Fall Presidential elections come, everyone will be for the UNM.

This opinion has been echoed among the local Christian spiritual leaders too. Although, it is similarly important to consider Father Saba Zhghenti's opinion on this whose statements are contradictory:

Father: *[..] I told them that they would have transportation and fuel to travel to Adjara to pray. There has never been a mosque here and there will never be one. They refused to travel to Adjara to pray. The previous government has been assisting us in our attempts. The current one does not support us at all. ...they want to win the elections and it has made everything complicated [...] before the elections, the UNM promised them to bring a mullah and build the mosque. However, these agreements were made in secret, without our involvement. Look how big their prayer house is now.*

The researcher: *Weren't you saying that the previous government has been supporting you?*

Father: *We thought so too, but apparently not. Now the new government is supporting them.*

The theory about the purposeful provocation of the conflict is widely believed among the ruling majority as well, including Eka Beselia²⁰ and Murman Dumbadze.²¹

It's noteworthy that the proposed theory was less prevalent during the research period (June-July 2013). Big majority of the interviewees were more referring to the theory of Turkmenization when discussing the conflict later. According to this theory, local Christians claim that the opening of the prayer house was financed by Turkey and is a part of the Turkmenization process.

'The construction of a prayer house in Guria, is a part of the Turkish imperial political plan to spread Islam in various regions of Georgia.'

Another local Christian reiterated the same:

Turks want a mosque in every region and village, but it will not work out, we will not live with it.

In the interview with Netgazeti, Christina Gocha Chkrtishvili reads:

*[..] We have been living here for the last 25 years and now they want a mosque? It will not happen, if my religion needs it, I will even cut someone's throat, I cannot let Turks alter the history of my village, It will not happen.'*²²

Some local Christians are convinced that the prayer houses have been opened by unknown Turkish businessmen, and it is related to Islamization and the expansion of Turkish policies. For example, the principal of the Nigvziani public school says:

They go to Turkey all the time and something is happening there, they have some type of offering and Turkish businessmen finance them, and no one knows what their reason is. This all looks like an Islamization process.

The local Muslims, however, denied this accusation and said that in order to open the prayer house, there was a need to collect funds through donations. One Muslim man, around 45 years, who was directly involved in purchasing the prayer house, recalled the following details:

The story about the prayer house being funded by Turkish people is wrong, It happened a different way, one Turkish man wanted to develop green houses in Georgia and asked for help. Otar Tsilosani was selling his house in our village, the person bought it and left for Eastern Georgia, towards Marneuli, and bought some other plots of land. He then got in touch with us and said that he would not be in the position to take care of this plot of land and a house in Nigvziani. The house was given to the Mufti governance, then one person, Avtandil Tsintskladze, donated around 10.000 USD to the Mufti governance, this house is now registered under Avtanil Tsintskladze, however, the situation was understood by people differently.

Many Muslims think that the lack of the policies on funding the religious minorities' results in distorted views on conflict and provokes unfounded fears. One of the Muslim prayers said:

²⁰ Channel 9, 02.11.2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDStvVcvi4>

²¹ for.ge, 06.11.2013, http://www.for.ge/view.php?for_id=18341&cat=3

²² Netgazeti, 01.11.2013, <http://www.netgazeti.ge/GE/105/News/14303/>

The government should fund other religions. These families resettled some 25 years ago and they had different concerns back then, they were small in number. Now there are more followers, there are around 90 voters in Adjara, they have realized that they are entitled to freedom and want their own prayer house. [...] it is a human right. Newly settled people have been trying to establish themselves and survive; now we have fed our kids and have become economically stronger. We, as other residents in this country, also pay taxes, this is how the state exists, why shouldn't other religious groups receive funding? Everyone should be funded.

The need for funding has been emphasized by Mufti Jemal Paksadze: "The Muslim governance has been demanding the funding for the last 20 years. We were granted the status of the legal entity which makes possible for us to receive funding from the state, but nowadays, we are only funded by Georgian believers, which is not much."

The Muslim Community rejected both the theory related to the support of the previous government, and the theory about the expanding influence of Turkey, and said that it is only fighting for the rights and dignity. The Muslim Community sees the opening of a prayer house in Nigvziani, as a upshot of its integration and social evolution. Muslims know that they constitute a significant part of the village, and therefore, feel they have the right to have their own prayer house in the village. The same sentiments are shared by the local, Khoja Kakhadze:

From the very beginning, when eco-migrants settled here [in Nigvziani], no one was thinking about the opening of a prayer house, our days were full of concern over social issues and we were short on funds, the situation was quite different. Now, after things have changed, I think my kids and I need it [a prayer house], I want to have a little prayer house and I do not think there is anything criminal about that.

As the analysis of the interviews with the Muslim Community members shows, the Elections in October, as well as, the possibility to register religious groups as legal entities were perceived as a chance of practicing more freedom for religious minorities. According to one Muslim: "After the religious associations were allowed to register as legal entities, we had hopes that we could conduct group prayers."

A 50 year old Muslim made a similar observation:

Prior to this, Muslims did not have these demands. Maybe before, they were even afraid to voice them. Time by time they got to realize their rights. People feel that there is more democracy now. Allowing the registration of the religious groups was also a big achievement prior to the elections.

Muslim Community perceives the fight for its rights as a precedent and thinks it set an example with demanding the prayer house and this way eased the fight for the rights to others (a Muslim man of around 50 years old).

The discourse analysis of the interviews with the Muslim Community members also shows that they themselves identify Turkey as an enemy and want to distance themselves from it, and sometimes even express hatred towards it. A man in his 50s stated: "There is a need for a new mosque in Batumi, as

there is not enough space there, but I do not want a mosque to be built by Turkey. I do not want to fall under someone's hegemony, I would rather fund it myself and I will be a very happy man. Now Turkish people are enjoying themselves in Batumi and it is a little dangerous." Another Muslim made a similar statement: "Batumi became a Turkish city and it is dangerous, the government should stop allowing Turkish people to buy everything in Batumi. Yes, he is a Muslim, but he is also Turkish at the same time, but this is my country and I do not like their behavior. They [Turks] want to forfeit my land, the government could lease them some properties rather than grant the ownership to Turks for good."

2.3.2. Issues of inclusion of the Muslim Community in the local public policies and possible discrimination towards them.

Local Muslims in their interviews said that Adjarian Muslims are not employed in public offices (allegedly owing to their religious affiliation). An Adjarian woman said: "No Adjarian is employed here, no wants to employ, not even as a guard, we were told that we only had a right to vote, I think this is done on purpose." Similar observations were made by another Muslim: "There are no Adjarians who work for the local council, the school, or anything else". "No Adjarian teacher can be employed here, no one will employ an Adjarian, not even as a house keeper or a guard" (another Muslim man).

According to the local Muslims, the local government does not take their needs into consideration; they also report that they are being increasingly discriminated. With respect to this, the local Muslims said the following:

Recently money was transferred to the village to provide water to us. Currently, there is no water supply in the village. The village trustee and Christians want this money to be spent elsewhere, they want to build a parking lot on the territory adjacent to the Georgian church. We do not oppose to that idea, but we do not want it to happen at the expense of water (Muslim woman under 50 years).

For example, we had drawn water from the site where the church is [we are talking about the few Adjarian families]. They cut the water to us after the incident. In the village center they erected a cross, there is a small spring there and we started sourcing some water from there; Christians removed the bolt and stopped the spring as well. They said that we do not have right to use the water (a Muslim boy under 25 years old).

In addition, the Muslim Community expressed its concerns about the fact that they can't have cemeteries arranged according to their traditions.

We do not have cemeteries; even though there was a space allocated. We have worked hard to make the territory; we removed the bushes. But after the conflict, Christians threatened us that if we buried anyone there, they would exhume the bodies and feed them to the pigs. We Adjarians bought this place ourselves (Muslim boy under 25 years old).

Khoja, a local, also stressed on the issue that the local policies consider the Muslim Community interests to a very small extent.

I do not go to the village meetings - not because I do not care about my village or I do not want things to be done here, but I just do not attend because no one cares about our opinion. When a meeting is convened to discuss some topics, the decisions are already made. It is the same in relation to the water supply and the parking lot.

2.3.3. Proselytism at Nigvziani public school

Interviews taken from the representatives of the Muslim Community and from the teachers, report of proselytism and of the attempts of indoctrinating the Adjarian pupils. The local Muslims say that the indoctrination of Muslim pupils is a common practice and refer to numerous cases of discrimination, also speaking about the collective prayers at schools and inadequate teaching of religion or history classes.

70 percent of the future generation are Adjarians. Teachers are directly working on converting them into Christianity [...] there were cases when the teachers were refusing to check pupils' homework if they didn't say the prayer Our Father and light the candle first (wife of Khoja Kakahadze).

At school they differentiate between Adjarian and Gurian children. Gurians mock Adjarians over their accent. Moreover, every morning children, including Muslims, were forced to cross themselves [...] some of the Muslim kids refused to pray on purpose. There were some arguments as to why Muslims would not pray as Christians (Muslim worshiper woman).

There was one incident at school, the music teacher started to talk about Georgian invaders and brought the map from the history study room and told the pupils: 'Kids, you go and pray there [in Muslim prayer houses], but I will now explain to you who you really are.' The teacher showed the pupils how Turks entered Georgia to invade its territories and said that 'the Fathers of Adjarians were all killed and their wives were raped by Turks, and you, kids, are their bastards.' When the parents found this and demanded explanations from the teacher, the teacher denied of saying such a thing (wife of the local, Khoja Kakahadze)

On one rainy day after the conflict, I put Valenki on my kids. The teacher of physical education singled out six Adjarian kids and punished them for not wearing sport shoes. There were some other Gurians who were not wearing sport shoes either, but the teacher punished only the Adjarians and made them wash dirty tissues (Muslim man).

According to Muslims, people started to react to such violations after the conflict a lot and the school administration has been careful since then.

Despite the fact that the school principal and the teachers interviewed denied any facts of possible indoctrination and discrimination happening, their statements suggest otherwise. The expressed attitudes speak of high chances the principles of secularism and religious neutrality are being violated. A dialogue with the music teacher is noteworthy in this respect:

Teacher: *The children were praying during lesson time.*

Researcher: *Did the Muslims protest?*

Teacher: *No, no one protested, the only pupil who was not praying was the son of Badri Kakhadze. The prayer 'Our Father' is almost identical for both Christians and Muslims. During the lesson, I talked about the importance of 'Iavnana' and about 'Gocha and Khvicha,' who were sold on the Turkish market, these are historical facts, should I not have spoken about them?*

Research: *Do you think that Muslim kids should have protested about the Christian prayers?*

Teacher: *No, they should not have protested, since these children were misled by their parents.*

Researcher: *The school principal told us she had summoned the teachers and had told them to stop religious rituals at school. Is it right?*

Teacher: *Pupils are not forced into anything, they can either pray or not, one of the pupils said that his father would kill him if he prayed and we laughed about it. How could you say such a thing to a child about reciting a prayer of only one paragraph? That is how you can judge their level. This is why I think that history and geography is good for their development, so that they can figure out what the truth is. I cannot segregate pupils from each other, I love them equally, but I have my own principles and I am staying loyal to them.*

The teacher's interviews often contain xenophobic and Islamophobic messages. They also show that the teachers fail to stay neutral and tolerant (see the Chapter 2.3.4).

Yet, owing to inappropriate treatment at school, Muslim pupils took part in the protests against the prayer house. The pupil's participation in the rally turned out to be very painful for the local Community. Pupils chanting that they wanted unity and were against building the mosque in the village. One Muslim, in his explanation, recalled: "When I saw that my own kids were brought to the rally against me, I was deeply offended. I felt ashamed and did not know what to do. All our [Muslim] children were brought to the protest". According to the school principal, all of the pupils came to the protest on their own and there was no possibility to stop them. With joining the rally they wanted to claim the unity between these two communities.

2.3.4. Identity of the Adjarian Muslims and their indoctrination in Nigvziani Village

The tendency of converting to Christianity - which is often happening with the power of the established social norms, degree of conformity or due to the on-going indoctrination processes - is very prevalent in the village of Nigvziani. This is conditioned by the level of intolerance the Christian religious leaders, as well as the Christian Community shows towards Adjarian/Georgian Muslims.

Nigvziani public school teacher of the music class recalls: "Now they started to claim that they are Georgian Muslims, I have never heard of anything like that. I do not want them [here]. I am a Christian and I will not allow them to build a mosque here." The history teacher of the same school has similar opinion: "Has there ever been a mosque on a Christian territory? Aren't you familiar with the history? Has the history ever witnessed such a thing? Or is it only now that they started to want to build a mosque? Now they say they are Georgian Muslims; I have never heard of such a thing before." It is also interesting to analyze the answer of one Christina woman on the question whether there would have been a different attitude if the Adjarians had been Catholic? "There would not have been any problem, I have visited Catholic Church many times, Catholics are Christians, and these [Muslims] have nothing to do with Christianity."

The preaching of local priests also contributed to alienating the Muslim Community from the locals and discrediting their religious identity. Father Saba said the following:

We have erected a cross next to their prayer house; this is the Christian way. What else should I have done? This is evil, everything beyond Christianity is evil. That is why I erected a cross in the centre of the city; I did not put it in their house.

In his other interview, the Father also talked about the importance of converting to Christianity:

[...] in a little while we will have a mosque here, do we need mullah to scream here? We know the history, right? Once upon a time in Tbilisi, a Georgian man shot a mullah and removed him from the mosque; yes, there is a mosque now in Tbilisi, but this is Guria, not Tbilisi. Turks are getting to Georgia with the help of bad Georgians. We do not belong to ourselves anymore; they [Muslims] should convert to Christianity. Would that not be better?! In Khulo, last week, around 8.000 Muslims were baptized. We have nothing to argue about.

Islamophobic preachings had a heavy impact on the local Christian Community, and had influenced it in many ways. In his statement, the economics teacher maintained:

Father said that their food was idolized and did not want us to eat it. The same way as we conduct Panashvidi [rituals for funerals], they pray too but they pray for evil and Father told us not to eat their food.

This approach of the Church and the local Christians is felt by Muslims and is painful for them to accept. The wife of the local, Khoja, stated:

It is very insulting when they identify me as a Tatar. This does not only happen in Nigvziani but it is a common attitude towards Adjarians in general. Saba Zhghenti has directly said that we are not Georgians. [...] we are repeatedly told that we have to convert to Christianity. They say that if our ancestors were Christians, we also have to convert to Christianity.

In her interview with Netgazeti, a Muslim, Meri Iakobadze, who resides in Nigvziani, stated: "I've been feeling offended whole my life because I am an Adjarian, they tell us to go home to Adjara [...] why should I feel ashamed for being Adjarian?." ²³ Another Adjarian observed: "It is our land, our district, but they make us feel as if we owe them it." ²⁴

The Adjarians' religious identity is the very condition that the local Christians think is causing infringement of their civic and political rights. The wife of the local, Khoja, in his interview recalled: "At one of the meetings with the neighbors, someone said that Islam is associated with the enemy." They said that we had to obey to whatever they said and then we could freely participate in the elections. An Adjarian, who was later baptised, said in his interview with Netgazeti:

The conflict can only be settled arranged if the public prayer houses are closed cancelled and if they pray silently at home. It is the people who decide on this issue. They should stop gatherings and the conflict will stop.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

The local Christian Community also feared losing the political majority in the village and were worried about preserving their own power. A local clergy member, Saba Zhghenti, stated: "If there are elections in the village, they will nominate their own candidate. They are the majority".

Religious leader, viewed inter relation between Minority and Majority groups differently: "It is believed that they are a minority, but this is not a case. At the moment, they [Adjarians] constitute the majority. We were forced to say that Adjarians are a minority, if we said that they were the majority, then it would have meant that they needed a mosque and that we are stopping them from it, this is why we said that they are a minority. So, the [government] said that if they are a minority –they need to be protected and we [Christians] had no way out."

The Muslim Community had also realized the fears of the Christian Community and maintained that "some of the Christians said that they wanted to intervene with our right to pray by all means. According to them, if this little prayer house had been opened, we would have demanded a prayer house in every corner."

2.3.5. Social contrasts as the cause of alienation between the communities

Local Muslims think that the social and economic differences were one of the factors that caused alienation between them and Christians. With their hard work the Muslims managed to get economically stronger and gain some prosperity, which has been a disturbing fact for the Gurian Community. One of the Muslim women explains:

We are hard working people, we work every day, they [Gurians] cannot tolerate this, once, during the conflict, they said that they did not like the fact that we were better off.

The observation of another Muslim was similar: "Gurians envy us, every time they see a good horse, a good car, or a good tractor, they say it belongs to Adjarians; They are unhappy." These differences were further reinforced by the school principal:

Muslims, owing to the very severe conditions in the high mountains of Adjara, are used to working a lot. [...] they work hard and do not have a single patch of land unutilized. The children of Adjarian Muslims get up early in the morning, work with a hoe and go to school only afterwards. They support their parents a lot.

2.4. The assessment of the roles the major actors in resolving the conflict.

The assessment of the roles the central and local government, the Church, the Muslim Governance of Georgia (hereinafter Mufti governance), the Office of the Public Defender of Georgia, NGOs or the media played in the process of peaceful and fair regulation of the conflict vary a lot. Which can obviously be explained with the fact that they have different positions and stances.

2.4.1. The assessments of Nigvziani Muslim Community

The Muslim Community positively assessed the role played by the central government in resolving the conflict. The Community particularly emphasized the positive contribution of Eka Beselia. Khoja Giorgi Khimshiashvili said: “Eka Beselia played a very important role, she arrived here and said to people: here is the church and here is the mosque, you are free to go to whichever you want.” Other Muslims also shared the same assessment. “Eka Beselia has saved us, we are very grateful to her, she has managed to calm the people down. She summoned us to the parliament. We went, Christians did not go. We were given the right to pray, and since then, everything has improved.” The Muslims think that this is only now, during the current government that, for first time, they are given the right to open a prayer house, which was impossible during the previous government. A Muslim woman said: “During the current government, we have seen more progress; previously, they would stop us from praying.” Mufti of Georgia, Jemal Paksadze, has also positively assessed the role of the central government.

Contrary to what has been mentioned so far, the Muslim Community believes that the local government played quite a negative role in the conflict and did not do anything to resolve it. One of the Muslim residents said: “The local government urged the people against us. It was the government who stirred up the conflict.” On this point, the local Khoja said:

We would not have managed anything if the government did not intervene. The local trustee was trying to do something and behaved well but he was complaining that Gurians did not listening to him. Irakli Gujavidze couldn't have done anything, even if he wanted to. He once told us that people were not ready for the next step and he was right. The governor of the district did not do anything, there was not even an effort, there was resistance from his side.

According to the local residents, the police were quite passive throughout the conflict and did not intervene to stop the offences. One Muslim woman stated: “The police is inactive and every time there is an incident they do nothing. Police only stood there and watched our men being insulted.” According to Muslims, the police started to carry out their duties only after there was a political decision made on this. One of the Muslim female retells: “The police started patrolling every single day after the conflict, while they've have never done a thing before. They only started to react after the decision was made in the Parliament”. Another Muslim man said a similar statement:

The police started to protect us. Previously when even the Mufti was not allowed in the prayer house, the police did not intervene and only watched this happening from a distance.

The Muslim Community was pleased with the role the office of the Public Defender of Georgia, NGOs and the media played in resolving and activating the topic of the conflict and expressed their gratitude towards them. Although, the observation of the local Mufti, Jemal Paksadze, should be emphasized here: “Practically, they are supporting Islamophobia. Very often the media reports are not accurate and Muslims are identified as Turks. Islam originated from the Arabian Peninsula, pretty much as Christianity was spread from Jerusalem, and these are not the religions bound to particular countries, these are supra-national religions”.

Local Muslims said that the central church played a positive role in resolving the conflict. In his statement, a Georgian Mufti, Jemal Paksadze, said:

The role of the patriarch is very big, I respect him profoundly, and I thank him cordially for resolving this problem. He was firm in his statement to the Archbishop when he said that it was a shameful act to stop Muslims from praying and that they had the right to pray.

Despite the fact that the role of the Patriarch was positively assessed, the Muslim Community said that the local clergy, including Father Saba Zhghenti, had been the ones provoking and encouraging the conflict. According to the Khoja, B. Kakhadze, in the course of the conflict, on November 1, Father Saba Zhghenti came to his house with twenty Christian residents and urged him to stop the prayers. B. Kakhadze recalls:

[...]they were aggressive and I tried to calm them down, but they told me ‘go and pray in your Pereidan’. He wanted to humiliate me. I told them that we were all equal, and that he, wearing his religious robe, was the God’s servant and much more was expected from him. After this, the Father started calling me the devil; he also insulted my religion and condemned the Quran and Muslim religion as evil. Meanwhile, the people who were accompanying him verbally assaulted my family and called us Tatars. They wanted us to leave our house and to resettle somewhere else.

Another Muslim also stated:

I think that maybe the representatives of the local church, including Father Saba, were the ones urging the local Community to rebel against us. If the Father had called for peace, nothing would have happened; I think he directly turned the Christians on us. It is hard to believe the central church did not know about it? And if did not, why was it so?

2.4.2 The assessments of Nigvziani Christian Community

The local Christians were unhappy due to the fact that, despite their resistance, Muslims were allowed to open a prayer house and hold public prayers. The Christians allege that the central government was wrong to support local Muslims. One Christian woman said: “The current government is no good, pretty much as the previous one the current government wants to take special care of the Muslims.” According to the local Christian Community assessments the Government did not have any other choice but to allow Muslims to pray. In this respect, an interview with an Economics teacher is interesting:

Researcher: *What has changed after the 'Georgian Dream' came into power?*

Teacher: *Nothing, what could the Georgian Dream do? The Media and the civil society were the ones who brought this issue to the surface, otherwise, it would have been handled quickly. We could have regulated it ourselves and there would not have been any need to intervene.*

In the course of the conflict the local Christians would indicate that the issue of building a mosque should have been resolved in favor of the majority and that the government and the Church could not have opposed. A local Christian woman, for whom it was unacceptable to build the prayer house, said: "The only way out of this situation is to not build the mosque, I do not care about the Constitution and rights, and even if Ilia the II or the President arrives in the village, we will not allow them to built it."²⁵

The local Christians were against of resolving the conflict with issuing the allowance for the Muslim prayer house to function. They did not participate in the discussions of this topic at the Committee on Human Rights and Civil Integration in the Parliament of Georgia either. The Christian Community thinks that the conflict was largely resolved by the clergy, although, Christians express their dissatisfaction with the results achieved. They blame the clergy in curbing the Christians and allowing the conflict to settled down.

According to the local Christians, representatives of the Office of the Public Defender of Georgia and were the ones who encouraged the Muslims to start the conflict and who contributed to the escalation of the conflict. The Christian Community also complained that the representatives of the NGOs and of the Public Defender's Office were only meeting with Muslims and never approaching the Christians.

²⁵ Ibid.

3. A review of the religious conflict in Tsintskaro village

3.1. Social and religious composition of Tsintskaro residents

Tsintskaro is situated in Tetrtskaro district, in the region of Kvemo Kartli. Previously, this village was largely populated by ethnic Greeks. Soon after most of them left Georgia, ethnic Azerbaijanians moved there. In 2005 eco-migrants from the high mountainous regions of Adjara and Svaneti started settling here. As of today there are around 600 families living in the village, out of which 100 families are ethnic Azerbaijanians and the rest are Adjarians and Svans with equal numbers. Most Adjarians converted to Christianity, but some twenty families preserved the Islamic religion. Adjarians are Sunni, while Azeris are Shia. This means their religious practices differ from one another and they do not pray together. The Muslim and Christian Communities have been interacting peacefully and mixed marriages have been documented. A precondition to form a family, however, is to have a common religion. Despite the peaceful co-existence in previous years, the religious conflict of 2012 revealed the tendencies of an estrangement between these two communities. The local Azerbaijanians have not participated in the conflict. The attitudes towards them from the side of the parties involved in the conflict is neutral, which can possibly be explained with the fact that Azerbaijanians pertain to a different ethnic group and locals are more distanced/alienated from them.

3.2. The chronology and dynamics of the religious conflicts in Tsintskaro

3.2.1. Establishment of the prayer house in Tsintskaro

The prayer house in Tsintskaro was established in the beginning of November 2012 with the assistance of Mufti governance of Georgia. Before, for attending the prayers the local Adjarian Muslims would go to Marneuli or the neighboring village of Kosalara. This, on its hand was a financial burden to them. Often issues of this nature were making their participation in collective prayers impossible. According to Mufti Jemal Adadze Tsintskaro residents had addressed the Mufti governance of Georgia with the request to open a prayer house yet in 2011. After assessing the needs of the village residents the Mufti governance bought a prayer house to the local Muslims. The information on this was available to the residents yet in the beginning of November, 2012, although there had been no resistance to it from their side before. The first incidents happened only when the crosses of common Muslim and the Christian cemetery gates were cut down. Although, the analysis of the statements of the local population shows that despite the fact that cutting the crosses was only the reason to initiating the conflict, the local Christian Community had substantial resistance towards opening a Muslim prayer house in the village.

3.2.2 The review and chronology of the conflicts unfolded in Tsintskaro Village

Two years ago the local self-governing bodies issued money for erecting the gates around a common Christian and Muslim cemetery. Even though the cross on top of the gate was not particularly appealing to the Muslim Community, there were no attempts to remove it. In relation to this incident, the local mufti stated:

[...] they addressed the village trustee and told him that the existence of the cross on a Muslim cemetery contradicted with their religious beliefs. The village trustee did not take this request of

the Muslim community into consideration and told the following: 'What country are we leaving in? Which century is this? Everybody should know that we passed through darkness. There is no time to stay in the darkness. We are not Turks, we are not Tatars.'

According to the local Mufti, as well as the local community, on the grave stone of one of the Muslim teachers, whose family is Christian, they put a cross but it was impossible to remove it.

We asked the authorities to intervene, but they proposed us to resolve these internal issues ourselves, while they would take care of the cross on the gate. There has been no agreement, we could not manage to remove the cross from the grave, and the authorities also failed to remove the one from the gate.

By the end of November 2012 the cross was secretly removed, which stirred up more aggression among the Christians.

On November 29, 2012 members of the local Christian Community assaulted Khoja Marad Ghorjomelidze and verbally abused him. Marad Ghorjomelidze commented:

On November 29, the residents gathered the village center and threatened me with eviction and burning down my house. There were also some attempts to physically assault me, but they were stopped in time. They were also accusing me of removing the cross. I did not remove the cross, nor did I desecrate it. If someone would desecrate the Koran, we wouldn't forgive them either, so I do not really blame them. Whoever removed the cross should not have done it. It should have been removed through an intervention of the authorities. It should not have been set up initially; no one has consulted us on this. Once it was there, however, we did not say anything. I cannot identify the reasons related to its removal though.²⁶

On November 30, 2012 at 12:30, around 30 minutes before the prayers, up to 40 local Christians, mostly men, came to the prayer house and prevented the Muslim Community from praying. Members of the Christian Community were very aggressive while doing so. The video footage taken during this period indicates the tension and high degree of aggression.²⁷ Local Christians stated they would forcibly dismantle the prayer house. If the prayer house would not be shut down, this would have resulted into a more serious confrontation.²⁸ The police was also present around the prayer house in order to regulate the situation. Later that day Muslims managed to hold their prayers. Local Christians told the media:

They will now call it a mosque, they will give it the shape of the mosque, and they will then call the mullah. Around here there are only Christians, and now I will have to listen to the mullah screaming in the mornings, would I rather not listen to the Christian prayer (local Christian Zurab Chelidze)?

They can set up a mosque somewhere in a remote part of the village. Which Christian would be happy to have a Muslim praying next to him? It is not reasonable. No Christian can stop them from praying, but putting a prayer house just in front of us, is little bit too much (local Christian Meduli Chkadua).

²⁶ Kakheti Information Center, 03.12.2012, <http://www.ick.ge/articles/13081-2012-12-03-16-17-57.html>, see also http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=kjoiTqfX8aY

²⁷ Public Broadcaster, 30.11.2012, <http://1tv.ge/news-view/44469>

²⁸ Rustavi 2, 30.11. 2012, <http://youtubekensaku.com/detail/kg-d9ZyBMLE>

[...] No-one has stopped them from praying. Now they want a mosque to be established, this is why they have bought this house but who will stop them to pray in their houses? This is a Christian village and an official mosque will not be opened in Tsintskaro (local Christian Ramaz Chelidze)²⁹.

Somewhat later another Christian resident of the village gave a similar statement:

[...] this village has been a Christian village since ancient times; this is why there are so many Christians living here. If it were a Muslim village, I would not have come here. We have resettled here voluntarily. I knew that there were Muslims here, but I had hoped I would not have any problems with them.

The same observation was made by another Christian man.

I love this village since it is a Christian village and this is what our ancestors have been fighting for. I cannot have a mosque here; I will not accept it and will die for it.

The local Muslims find it difficult to process these statements made by the Christian Community.

They say that mullah will scream during the Friday prayers. So what? We hear their bells ringing every day, but we do not take any notice of it. It does not disturb us. We are happy that they are praying. As we respect their religion, they are also entitled to respect ours. As a citizen I have equal rights, as them (Muslim women, around 50 years old).

The village trustee, Tamaz Mosidze, stated in his interview to the media on November 30, 2012 that the conflict should be resolved in favour of the majority and that even if there were only three to ten families who wanted to build the prayer house it was still how it should have been dealt. According to him the rights of the local Muslim Community were not violated since they could travel to the neighbouring villages to pray.³⁰

On 4 December 2012 Members of Parliament (MPs), including Soso Dzachvliani and Victor Japaridze, travelled to the venue to enquire about the situation. The MPs met with the resettled Svans and spoke with them about the conflict. None of the Muslims attended this meeting. During the meeting one of the local Christians, Zurab Chelidze, stated:

The youngsters have decided to go to the house early in the morning and block their [Muslims'] way to the prayer house. The meeting will be bloody, someone will start fighting and it will be difficult to find out whether it was Adjarians who were injured or someone from our part. There will be a murder, we will not give it up, they will set up for fighting and we will also face them, we can't tell who dies and who doesn't in advance.

To this assessment, Deputy Victor Japaridze said: "It [the bloodshed] is inevitable." He maintained, "[...] they do not want their rights to be violated but our rights are also being violated, is not it so? Residents of the village will only calm down if those who removed the cross will be held responsible. How did they dare? What can one call it? These are the methods of the previous government to bring in some destabilisation." Later in his interview he stated: "If you are talking about the violation of rights, why do you not consider that when the mullah will start screaming at six o'clock in the morning, the rights of Christians will also be violated? What if they do not want to listen to their prayers at six o'clock.

²⁹Information and video footage prepared by Kakheti information center 03.12.2012,

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=OIHz2x6DmCU

³⁰ Video footage prepared by Netgazeti 30.11.2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mMfltuxJz5g#t=365>

Whoever wants to pray, can pray in the house. It is not necessary to disturb someone with their prayers.”³¹

On December 7, 2012 the Christian Community gathered at the Muslim prayer house again. The police was mobilised as well. The Muslims were able to pray. It’s noteworthy that only one local Muslim participated in it. All the rest had travelled to Tsalka and nearby villages.

According to the local Christians and the village trustee Mosidze, 7th of December the parties had agreed that there would be no prayers. However, allegedly the Mufti governance violated this promise and held prayers anyway. The village trustee in his interview with the researchers stated:

We had agreed that before meeting Ilia II the prayer house should not be opened, however, on the second day Jemal Adanidze came anyway. We asked him not to open the prayer house before we would meet the Patriarch in a week’s time, and asked Jemal Paksadze to obey their instructions as well.

Based on media footage, the local Christians protested over the fact that the promise was broken and they urged that it could lead to possible violence and bloodshed.³² The Christian Community also said that they might not obey the police.³³

Later on the research revealed that the Christians thought it was the breaking of the agreement by the Muslim leaders that stirred up the conflict.

Muslims and Christians made an agreement to close down the prayer house. Muslims had already decided to close the prayer house, however, after some urging from the local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) they decided to re-open it. [...] Svans also became angry that the agreement had been broken. This is why the confrontation reached its peak. This is why the Svans said there would be bloodshed (Local Svan Christian).

On 7 December 2012 the Prime Minister published on the web his official statement saying the confrontation between Christians and Muslim looked like a provocation. According to the Prime Minister:

These kinds of tensions are very new to our society; this is not the Georgian spirit. Orthodox Christians have been living next to members of other religious groups for centuries and there have never been any confrontations based on religious grounds. This is why I think that the tensions on religious grounds by all means are a provocation and serve to discredit the Georgian government. Freedom of religion is a constitutional right and our government will not allow restricting this right. The law enforcement agencies, however, are in a position to investigate any infringement of this right and everyone who took part in this shameful confrontation will be punished.³⁴

³¹ Kakheti information center, 03.12.2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=36RIBpWx9LU

³² Video footage prepared by Palitrav, 07.12.2012
<http://www.palitrav.ge/akhali-ambebi/sazogadoeba/24443-dapirispireba-tsintsyaroshi-religiuri-shughli-thu-shegnebuli-provokacia.html>

³³ Video forage prepared by EMC.07.12.2012
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=506188772747100>

³⁴ Article by Netgaeti, 12.07.2012
<http://www.netgazeti.ge/GE/105/News/15224/>

The Metropolitan of Manglisi and Tsalka Eparchies, Anania, has also evaluated the conflict as artificial in the interview on October 2013, and stated that the local Christians were not in any way opposed to the opening of the prayer house.

[...] there have been lots of Muslims brought to the village in buses from all over, including Pankisi. They held a big rally and were accompanied by TV cameras. You know, a [Christian] man was interviewed and he was asked whether he knew the Muslims were building the mosque and were advancing towards the village. The man did not know who these people were, and what they wanted. The locals have no conflict.

On 10 December 2012, Member of Parliament Zakaria Kutsnashvili facilitated a meeting between members of the Orthodox Community, the Muslim Community and their religious leaders. After the meeting it was said that the conflict had been exhausted. In his interview, Khucanashvili stated the following:

We had a meeting with Christians and Muslims to debate on these famous events. The meeting was also attended by the Tsintskaro Mufti, leaders of the village and Archbishop Anania. We agreed to end the conflict. As part of the promise, Georgian Muslims demanded the identification and punishment of the people who are suspected of desecrating the cross, while the Orthodox Christians stated that no-one will be allowed to intervene. Therefore there will not be any problem, if external powers do not continue to intervene.³⁵

By the end of the meeting Kuchanashvili gave members of the Muslim Community a Koran, while the Orthodox Christians received an icon of Saint George.

On December 14 2012 the U.S. Ambassador to Georgia, Richar Norland, travelled to Tsintskaro to meet with the local Muslims and talk with them about the situation. The Ambassador concluded the conflict was over and said:

I can now congratulate the locals that an agreement has been reached through the involvement of the state, religious organisations, local and international organisations. As a result of their endeavours, the Muslim community is given the opportunity to take part in Friday prayers. I came here as the U.S. Ambassador because religious freedoms are very important rights.³⁶

According to the local Christians, Muslims living in other villages are now banned to travel to Tsintskaro for prayers. This has been confirmed by the local Christians, as well as in the statements made by the members of the local-government bodies. According to the Muslims, setting up this type of restriction was unfair. However, they had to make some compromises.

[...] no-one can stop us from or the others from praying; we just compromised (Local Muslim boy, under 30 years old).

3.3.3 Current situation in Tsintskaro Village

As of today, Friday prayers are traditionally being held in the prayer house and some 30 local Muslims regularly attend the prayers. This number usually increases during religious holidays.

³⁵ Info9, 10.12.2012

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

³⁶ Channel, 9 on 14.12.12

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rs7Z0he8148>

3.3. The assessment on the reasons to the conflict in Tsintskaro Village

3.3.1 Political context of the conflict

The research findings showed that the Orthodox community believed that political motives were one of the major underlying reasons for the conflict. Moreover, they believe the conflict has been provoked from the outside and it had nothing to do with the alienation of the two communities.

Similar to the Nigvziani conflict, the local residents reflected on two major political theories causing the conflict. First off, the promise that the Muslim Community would receive a prayer house in exchange for votes to the previous ruling party.³⁷ The second theory was about the expansion of Turkish policies.

A Christian woman from Adjara said about this:

[...] this was probably like a ticking bomb plotted by the UNM to collect votes. This happened before the elections. Muslims had a prayer house, but people did not know about it. This fact therefore came to the surface when the elections were over.

A local Christian Svan woman had a similar opinion:

This was the trustee who caused everything. [...] he was interested in getting the votes and this was one of the reasons they were doing it. They were confident that they would win and that after Guria it would have yielded similar reactions.

Other respondents in their interview indicated that:

The conflict has been artificially inflated and there were underlying political reasons to it.

A school teacher said:

[...] it was so unexpected; it happened all of a sudden and ceased very quickly too. [...] we were thinking that someone might have done it artificially. It could have led to messing up the situation in the village to underline that a new government has come to power and religious minorities are being oppressed, etc.

Similar to the Nigvziani conflict, the locals from Tsintskaro support the theory on the expansion of Turkish policies into Georgia:

Soon after the road to Turkey was opened, Turks started coming to Georgia. They have more money and in every Georgian village, there is a prayer house (Local Svan Christian).

[...] they showed no interest in establishing a mosque. All of this was related to money. Turks bought this house to them and that was it. For example, if there are three to four men in the prayer houses, there will be no-one in few years. Muslims, as a rule are being converted to Christianity (Teacher at Tsintskaro public school).

The Mufti of Tsalka, Jemal Adadze, does not agree with the statements on Turks sponsoring the prayer house in Tsintskaro or any other villages involved in a religious conflict.

According to our rule, if someone requires some assistance, we release the note on Friday prayers, therefore whoever has any desire can donate money as much as they can, this person

³⁷ National United Movement

can be Georgian, Turk or anyone else, however the allegations that the donations are mainly from overseas is not right at all.

Unlike the local residents, the Christian religious leaders view these events in a different political paradigm. According to Metropolitan Anania of Manglisi and Tsalka Eparchies, the Tsintskaro conflict as well as those erupted in different villages, is only a part of the policies that are directed against the Georgian Church.

There is a big group in Tbilisi who does not like the fact that the Georgian Church enjoys great popularity and support. They managed to secure funds and bought houses in the region to discredit the Georgian Orthodox Church and clergy, and give false images of Muslims being oppressed here.

On the question as to who this group in Tbilisi is, the religious leader stated:

There is a political group, a group that is everywhere. One of the leaders of the Group is Beka Mindiashvili and his followers. They are supported by some members of the government as well. You know this group. This is an action against the Church, but in reality they cannot break the Church, the Church is unbreakable.

According to him, even the Mufti governance has been created by this group on purpose.

3.3.2 The assessment by both parties on the removal of the cross

Both parties of the conflict assume that it was the removal of the cross from the gate that led to this confrontation. According to the Muslim Community the cross on the gates of the cemetery of Adjarians and Svans, funded by the local Muslim Community had been problematic. It conflicted with their religious beliefs. A local 30-year-old Muslim said the following:

They put the cross on the local cemetery on purpose. We were not touching it, but it was not at all pleasant. [...] here in the village they put up crosses on the streets. This is very disrespectful to us, is it not? Those people who have removed the cross from the gates have no justification. Our Muslim men have demanded explanations from this person and reprimanded him. I think that this person was misled by someone.

On a similar note, Tamar Khozrevanidze, in his interview to Kakheti information center stated:

The cross had been placed on the Muslim cemetery on purpose. No-one liked it, but there was no intention to remove it, I do not know who removed it but I think this was used as a reason.³⁸

According to the local Christian Community it was exactly the removal of the cross that led to the conflict, otherwise they would not have confronted the Muslim Community. According to them, the prayer house had already been established in the village and they had more or less accepted it.

[...] if they had not removed the cross, Christians would not have said anything. Just because they removed the cross, disgraced it and left it there some sort of confrontations resulted (Christian Svan woman).

³⁸ Video footage and article prepared by Kakheti information center, 03.12.2012 <http://www.ick.ge/articles/13081-2012-12-03-16-17-57.html> also http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=kjoITqfX8aY

The local Christians did not see any problem in having a cross on the Adjarian cemeteries. Village trustee Tamar Mosidze said:

[...] I allocated the place for the cemetery in 2009. We put fences around the Adjarian, Svan and Greek cemeteries and we have placed crosses on all of these gates with a view to avoid different opinions, since some Adjarians are also Christians and Muslims.

According to the local Christians, removing the cross was a provocation and the person who did it was only obeying an order. One of the Christians expresses his own opinion:

He is Muslim, the one who was urged to do it, but he was urged by the Imam. First he opened the prayer house, and then he made him do it [...]. The person who ordered to remove the cross to my mind was the Mufti of the Kvemo Kartli region.

3.3.3 Issues related to the participation of the local population in opening the prayer house

As showed by the analysis of the statements made by both the Christian and Muslim Community members the local population, including the Muslims, was not properly informed about the opening of a prayer house in the village. A boy, younger than 30, said:

Two persons bought the house for the prayer without asking anyone. We did not know about it.

A similar observation was made by a Muslim woman:

Those who opened the prayer house have not shown much precaution since they did not warn anyone about it. Christians might not have a problem if everybody knew that a prayer house had been opened. They know about the difficulties we have when we go to mosque, it is so far away. They could not have been against it.

According to the Muslim Community, the fact that the majority of Muslims did not know about the opening of the house, mitigates the Christian's fault.

Christians were dissatisfied by the fact that the opening of a prayer house had been hidden and that no-one sought the advice of Christians or Muslims. Whoever plotted this ticking bomb went into hiding and left it all on this ordinary people. They did not know about the opening of the prayer house and considering that they did not know anything about it, they are trying to protect their principles (Christian Svan woman).

For Muslims and Christians the location of the prayer house had been problematic. One of the local Muslims in their interview said:

It is not reasonable to open a prayer house, everything shall be done according to its rules, but there is nothing we could have done. There was no way out.

An Adjarian woman also talked about the inconvenience to have a prayer house.

This house that had been blessed before had been sold, there are crosses on their walls and if they really want to have a prayer house, they could have built it separately; no-one would have stopped them.

3.3.4 The problem of proselytism at Tsintskaro public school

The local Muslims talked about indoctrination at public schools that they used to not protest against before. One Muslim recalled:

Don't we all agree that no one can preach religion at a public school or impose one's religion on anyone, etc.? This is prohibited by the law, isn't it so? But this happens; it is very bad that we are not protesting against it. Yes, there are lots of Christians in the school, but there are also some Adjarian and Azerbaijanians Muslims. We have not uttered a word when they were baptising the school either; we will voice our concerns on that now, however.

In this respect, we need to take a closer look at the analysis of the statements by the school teachers. A teacher of the Tsintskaro public school said:

We, Georgians, have survived owing to our religion: I often cite history as to how Georgians have been fighting for religion and how they died for it. The history of Adjara is very tragic and I am telling them how it was, how Georgians were dying for religion and how they were thrown into the river. This is how I see it and I do not know how one can accept it.

The comment of a chemistry teacher was way more direct:

The Bible, as well as the Koran, says that in the last period no one shall be Muslim and that everyone must be Christian.

3.3.5 The identity of the Adjarian Muslims and their indoctrination in Tsintskaro village

Adjarian Muslims believe their religious identity is unacceptable to Christians and they talk about an overwhelming evidence of indoctrination against Muslims who in Adjara or in any other region inhabited by Muslims.

It is noteworthy that the social non-acceptance of Muslims is becoming the reason to conformism and self-restraint. An interview with a Muslim boy corroborates to this finding:

There is a constant agitation that our ancestors were Christian. They say that we are Muslims, converted to Islam by Tatars and that we need to convert to Christianity. [...] we are surrounded only by the Georgian culture. If we, the Georgian Muslims do something that does not fit within the Georgian custom, it is un-acceptable for us. It might be understood wrong by others and it will be impossible for us to do it. If there is a possibility for us not to do that, why should we do it? We identify ourselves as Muslims. Being Georgian does not only mean that one is Christian. Religion does not pertain to particular group. [...] Georgians call us Tatars. [...] and when I was studying in Turkey they called me Gurc and I was very proud of it. [...] from 1990 to 2000 Muslims have been massively converting to Christianity, after the collapse of the Communist regime, atheism had been oppressed and there was a need for religion. I do not have any right to stop someone from changing their religion but if the faith is strong, one would not change the religion. I also want with my heart my kid to be Muslim.

The statements of one of the local Christians speak of non-acceptance towards Adjarian Muslim identities and of ongoing indoctrination processes, as well:

Swans were also worried about it and would ask to preserve the Georgian identity and not to lose it. [...] you know that this is one of the major concerns for Adjarians. If we look at the history, our

ancestors were Christians, we are Christians, just during these past three centuries, Muslim religion has become stronger and it is now difficult to talk about it, it is a sensitive topic (Local Adjarian lady).

[...] they understand history, who do they represent, where they are coming from, I think it also has an influence. A kid growing up here feels uncomfortable since you know about the history of the country and you know how they made you to accept a religion and how you have been oppressed. When he or she is standing next to a Christian, one feels uncomfortable. – asking, I am a Georgian too, why am I not a Christian? I think that whoever is young, they will all be christened. Whoever could not do that before graduating from school, will anyways manage to do so after becoming more independent (History teacher of Tsintskaro public school).

Whoever knows the history returns back to his or her religion. Whoever does not have the ability to differentiate and does not try to advance, blindly obeys to whatever, he or she does not know (Village trustee, Tamaz Mosidze).

3.4. Assessment by the conflict parties on the role of the main stakeholders

3.4.1. Assessment by the Muslim Community

The Patriarch of Georgia played a significant role in resolving the conflict. They respect him and they believe that he will make a proper decision. Before the meeting with the Patriarch, Muslim residents stated:

Today at six o'clock there is a meeting with the Patriarch. We are also going. We believe lots of things will be decided during this meeting. We want to have a prayer house in the village. We hope that it will be decided objectively. [...] the Patriarch has sufficient education and faith. We believe that he is tolerant. We trust that he will make an objective decision (Muslim boy, less than 30 years old).

The same observation was made by a Muslim woman:

The Patriarch would not stop anyone from praying.

Contrary to this, the local Christian clergymen would assist the process of indoctrination and did not have leverage to resolve the conflict in a fair manner.

It makes no sense now to talk with each other, the other day they marched through the whole village, they had an evening march, and they brought the cross and were praying.

Muslims expressed dissatisfaction with the role the central government played. Its representative would meet the local Christians but communicate with Muslims less.

The Muslim Community supposes that things will stay in past and as the time goes, everything will settle down.

3.4.2 Assessments by the Christian Community

The local Christian Community emphasised the significant role and the authority of the Patriarch in settling the conflict.

[...] the conflict had been regulated by the authorities. The request of Illia II also had a significant impact, in reality the Muslims receded because of his request and not because of the law (Local Christian Svan woman).

Everything is owing to the Patriarchate and also because we always had a very good relationship with each other (Local Christian).

It is important to highlight the expectations the Christian community had towards settling the conflict. It also explains the significance of the role of the Church and the Patriarch.

Researcher: *Whose contribution do you think it was that resolved the conflict? Was it that of the government or of the Patriarchate?*

Local Christian: *It is the Patriarch's contribution. People followed his word saying that we are all Georgians and everything will be settled throughout time.*

Researcher: *What do you think will be the resolution?*

Local Christian: *I think it is that these people will gradually convert to Christianity and they will gradually accept this faith. I see Muslim children in the church very often.*

Local Christians also positively assessed the policies which the State has implemented in relation to conflict. They, however, criticise the Public Defender, civil society and the media for facilitating the instigation of the conflict.

Media of course has lit the fire, and so did Beka Mindiashvili, a simple agreement could have been reached but this issue has been further inflated by the media and civil society. They were affirming that there were human rights violations. Otherwise, everything would have been simpler (Local Christian Svan woman).

Similar to the Muslim Community, the local Christians claimed they will try not to remember the events that occurred during the conflict and will attempt to forget about it all.

4. A review of religious conflicts unfolded in Samtatskaro

4.1. The social and religious composition of the population of the village of Samtatskaro

The village of Samtatskaro is located in the district of Dedoplistskaro in the Kakheti region. It borders Azerbaijan and is populated by Ingilo migrants from Azerbaijan and eco-migrants who traveled there from Adjara. Ingilos started moving to Samtatskaro in the 1930s, and in the beginning of the 1980s many Adjarian Muslim families were forced to move there as well. There are 480 households in the village in total; the majority of them (approximately 2/3) are Adjarians. Some Adjarians, especially the youth, converted to Christianity, whereas the rest are still preserving their faith in Islam, and identify themselves as “Georgian Muslims”. The majority of Ingilos are Christians. In order to present a full overview of the religious composition of the village, it should be mentioned that during the past 10-15 years a community of Jehova Witnesses has been forming in the city (up to 20 families), and has a place for assembly in the village.

There was not any religious conflict detected between the Orthodox and Muslim communities before October, 2013. The communities living in the village of Samtatskaro had always managed to cohabitate peacefully. There were even cases of intermarriage between the two groups. The surveys done on the local population show that the necessary prerequisite for creating mixed families is often the adoption of a common faith. When conversion into a common religion occurs, the influence of the gender hierarchy and of Christianity, as a dominant religion becomes obvious. For example, one local Christian lady recalls, “[...] there are a lot of mixed families. For example, I have an Adjarian sister-in-law, but when it comes to business she won’t take Adjara’s side. She likes Christianity.” A different woman reports the same, “Boys are converting into Orthodoxy. I am not saying anything about the girls. They will marry an Orthodox and be converted that way...”

Despite neighborly relations, the study of the conflict and post-conflict situations shows that the historic narratives, which speak of the identities of Ingilos and Adjarian Muslims have always been creating some level of alienation between the communities. According to one, strongly prevailing historic narrative of the Ingilo community, Ingilos managed to preserve Christianity despite the oppression from Azerbaijanian Muslims, and were eventually forced to leave their houses due to religious persecution. The interpretation and symbolization of its history in such a way diminishes the degree of tolerance towards Muslims in this community, which in itself played a negative role in conflict escalation.

4.2 The chronology and dynamics of the religious conflicts

The religious conflict in Samtatskaro was different from the two previous cases; it was more lengthy and grave, and the government played a negative role in the conflict. Also, unlike Nigvziani and Tsintskaro, here the Muslim community could not manage holding their traditional Friday prayer during the days of the conflict. After the end of the conflict the Muslim governance is not functioning in the village anymore.

Below is a detailed overview of the most critical moments of the conflict that lasted around 2 months.

4.2.1 The establishment of a prayer house in the village of Samtatskaro1

According to local Muslims, who are a group of active prayers, before the establishment of the prayer house in May of 2013, they used to perform traditional Jumu'ah prayers at Parmen Tsetskhladze's house. Previously, they would pray individually at home, but since the Jumu'ah prayer requires a specially designed place, they were not able to perform collective prayers. According to the Muslim prayers, within the 6 month period before the prayer house was opened, the prayers would regularly gather at Parmen Tsetskhladze's home every Friday. The explanations of the Muslim prayers are similar in this respect:

We bought the prayer house sometime in May. Before, we used to gather at Parmen Tsetskhladze's place (around 20-25 of us). The rest were sometimes at work, or had some other business, due to which they could not manage to come. But this number was always showing up during the Friday prayers. We have been praying for 6 months. We have not met any resistance there." – local Khoja Suliko Khozrevanidze.

According to another account by a Muslim prayer that used to join the prayers at Parmen Tsetskhladze's place, "...10 to 15 people. We were all old or middle-aged people: people who wait for an after-life and try to do some good."

According to the explanations of the local Muslims, the majority of the Muslim villagers later signed the collective address towards the Mufti governance with the request to open a prayer house in Samtatskharo. In his speech a local, Khoja Suliko Khozrevanidze, recalls:

The idea to open a prayer house came from the elderly. They live far from Parmen and had trouble getting to the prayers. That was the reason why they wanted to open a prayer house near their settlement. We addressed the Muslim governance about the request to establish a prayer house. [...] 100 families signed the address.

Another Muslim prayer (70 years old), that used to attend prayers at Parmen's place, has the same story. "This happened with the help of the Mufti governance. There were signatures collected in the village as well, but I was not at home that day. I was approving the opening of the prayer house. There were around 80 people who gave their consent."

According to Suliko Khozrevanidze, the Muslim community wanted to negotiate the issue of opening the prayer house with the local government and residents, but the village trustee refused to do so.

4.2.2 The first day of the conflict: May 24, 2013

During the days following the purchase of the building, the Muslim community was working on preparing the building for the prayers. The first prayer was to take place on May 24. This prayer was attended by the representative of the Muslim governance. The information on the scheduled prayer had been delivered to the village trustee, Gulnara Nadirashvili. At about twelve thirty, when the Muslim parish was reading the Quran in the prayer house, a group of local Christians (around 50 people) intruded and abused the Muslims. They took the carpet, the Quran, and the table where the Quran was placed and took them out onto the street. At that moment, Gulnara Nadirashvili, the village trustee was at the spot as well. According to Suliko Khozrevanidze, the policemen were at the prayer house at that moment, although did not act. The local Khoja recalls:

A bunch of drunk people broke in and started swearing. There were around 50 people. We had not uttered a word. They intervened and threw our carpets and Quran outside. The police broke in with them. They did not act; they just told them not to beat us, nothing more.

The video materials, recorded by the local media on May 24, show the position of the local Christians and the government. The local Christians thought it was impermissible to establish a Muslim prayer house in a Christian village, and said that they would not allow it to happen.³⁹

A local Christian, Shota Nadirashvili, in his interview to the Kakheti Information center, said:

*They demanded a Mosque, and where? My ancestors could not bear persecutions, nor the presence of Muslims. And now, here, on this holy land, in the Christian village we founded, they want to erect a Mosque. We will never allow it. Blood will be shed. We warned them a minute ago that this is neither Guria nor Lanchkhuti*⁴⁰.

In the video footage recorded by the Public Broadcast, the local Christians say that they won't allow a mosque to be built on Kakheti land. In their speeches you can detect the following ideas: "There has never been a Mosque in Kakheti!" "People really won't compromise. What shall we say to our ancestors when we go to them?!" Local Muslims say that they want the prayer house to function, but due to the fact that the majority is against it, they have to compromise, otherwise they will need to leave the village.⁴¹

In the public addresses recorded on the day of the incident the Samtatskaro regional governance trustee, Gulnara Nadirashvili, said that the issue should have been dealt with according to the wishes of the majority of the villagers and that the Muslims should have prayed at home.

*I warned them 5 days ago, told them to meet the residents, and if 60-70% agreed, they could open a Muslim prayer house separately and conduct prayers. Let's negotiate according to what the village decides. [...] our people told them to stop the prayers and leave the village. There are 11 prayers, no more. There are 1,600 people living in Samtatskaro, and how can we confront them, shouldn't we show restraint? I am not opposed; the people are. I am the mediator between them and the people. They should go and pray in their homes.*⁴²

In the address sent by the Public Defender's Office to the Ministry of Interior Affairs, where there was a study done on the ongoing conflict in Samtatskaro, it is mentioned that on May 24, after terminating the prayer, threats towards Suliko Khozrevanidze persisted. The threats warned that if the prayers did not stop, he and his family would have problems. There were threats towards other Muslim residents as well.⁴³

³⁹ Video footage by Kakheti Information Center, 24.05.2013

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=nIA2Vbrgffs#t=150

⁴⁰ Kakheti Information Center, 24.05.2013 <http://www.ick.ge/articles/14431-i.html>

⁴¹ Video footage by the Public Broadcast, 27.05.2013

http://www.myvideo.ge/?video_id=2050942

⁴² Video footage by Kakheti Information Center, 24.05.2013:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=9syVligFQBM#t=146

⁴³ Public Defenders address, 05.07.2013:

<http://news.ge/ge/news/story/58916-ombudsmeni-religiuri-dapirispirebis-amotsurva-orive-mkharis-survili>

4.2.3 The confrontation of May 31, 2013

The following Friday, on May 31, 2013, the local Christians still did not allow the Muslims to carry on with their prayers. Samtatskaro residents did not let the Muslim governance representatives enter the village and sent them away using force and threats.

In the interview to the Kakheti Information Center the Kvemo Kartli Mufti, Djemal Adadze tells, “The residents of the village came in several cars in very aggressive manner. They verbally abused my friends and me. They forced us to go to the cars and pushed us inside. They told us they would beat up our cars unless we left the place.”⁴⁴

The media and EMC video materials show the attitudes of the local Christians. According to them, the Muslims were not let inside the village in order to avoid further aggravating the situation.

*They should stop, so that whatever happened today – and this could have been even worse – does not happen again. Those people had their arguments just like we did. The majority thinks the Mosque should not be opened, and that was the reason why we did not let them inside the village, and we will continue to do so. If they don’t listen to reason, people might start fighting. – Irma Atabagi, resident of Samtatskaro Village.*⁴⁵

*There is no one against this religion. They can pray and do whatever they want at their homes. No one is against that, but we won’t allow an official prayer house to be opened here with all of its shouts and yells. We won’t let them in the village, as of today. - Guram Kiladze, resident of Samtatskaro Village.*⁴⁶

In the interview recorded on May 31, the Municipality governor, Irakli Shiolashvili, says:

There has been no conflict. The village expressed its wish; the wish of the village is of superior interest for the local self-government, and everything will happen the way people want it; and people don’t want the prayer house to be opened. Concerning the constitutional right on who should pray where and how they should pray, those three people that live in this village and wish to have a prayer house, have set prayer areas at their homes and have been praying that way for 37 years. Both sides have right to express their internal positions.”

According to I. Shiolashvili, no conflict was detected at the entrance of the village and the acts did not violate any legal norms. His stance is that he agrees with the people’s opinion and their opinion is supreme.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Kakheti Information Center, 03.06.2013

<http://www.ick.ge/articles/14503--videos.html>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=5QnMygYbM2E

⁴⁵ Kakheti Information Center, 31.05.2013

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=vj6d24cshIU

⁴⁶ Kakheti Information Center, 31.05.2013

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=vj6d24cshIU

⁴⁷ Kakheti Information Center, 03.06.2013 http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=j3rTwKgYW4s

4.2.4. Pressure on the local Khoja: June 7, 2013

On June 7, local Muslims still could not hold their traditional Friday prayer together due to incoming threats. The Muslim parish that gathered in front of the prayer house dispersed before the start of the prayer. The local Khoja Suliko Khozrevanidze, who had been taken away by the personnel of the Ministry of Interior Affairs (MIA), felt sick upon return to the prayer house and was in need of emergency medical care.

On Friday, June 7, starting in the morning the local Muslims gathered in front of the prayer house and repeatedly said that it was impossible to open the prayer house, as the Muslim parish did not exist in the village at all.⁴⁸

The village police, as well as, the MIA Kakheti regional office chief were mobilized and had to deal with the conflict during the whole day. The high-ranking police officials took the local Khoja, Suliko Khozrevanidze, from his home before the start of the prayer. His family members searched for him for an hour, but were not able to reach him on his phone, as he had it turned off. As it turned out, MIA personnel had taken Khozrevanidze to Parmen Tsetskladze's house. Parmen Tsetskhadze and his mother, Tsiala Tsetskhadze, tell the following story regarding the incident:

They made him cry. They put him in such a terrible position. They were people from the government. The people from the government told Suliko to gather all of the prayers who usually prayed together and go to the prayer house to pray; they would have let him do that. But who would have come out? The governors came by in the morning and told us people had arrived from Keda in groups. – Tsiala Tsetskhadze

They said they were people from the government. They told us to go and pray: that there was no problem with that. We told them that there was pressure from the village and we could not pray. They demanded us to name the people who were putting pressure on us. I can't name my villager. You know what will happen after that? We'll have problems." – Parmen Tsetskladze.⁴⁹

Suliko Khozrevanidze was brought to the prayer house by the police-owned black jeep a few minutes before the start of the prayers. Suliko Khozrevanidze got out of the car approximately 15 minutes after his arrival. In front of the journalists and non-governmental organizations, Suliko Khozrevanidze said that the people who had taken him were MIA personal, and that they demanded that he go into the prayer house and pray. He said, "We went at Parmen Tsetskhadze's place to talk. This person said we could not pray, as the residents did not agree with it. They told us that there was no one by the prayer house, we could and pray. [...] we do have a parish, but as far as there was resistance here, people dispersed."⁵⁰

Video footage shows that Suliko Khozrevanidze was stressed and intimidated and that it was necessary to call ambulance for him.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Kakheti Information Center, 08.06.2013: <http://www.ick.ge/articles/14566-i.html>;
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=KFupORYz9rY

⁴⁹ Kakheti Information Center, 08.06.2013: <http://www.ick.ge/articles/14566-i.html>
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=g8zLWqX2ux4

⁵⁰ Kakheti Information Center, 08.06.2013:
<http://www.ick.ge/articles/14566-i.html> ; http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=pg7CgJvgcy0

⁵¹ http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=YTfeJ_VjCM8

The statement published by the Public Defender later, said that on June 7, the MIA personnel threatened Suliko Khozrevanidze with detainment, and told him, he would “rotten in prison” and spoke to him in a sarcastic manner.⁵²

4.2.5. The visit of the State Minister for Reintegration to Samtatskaro on June 14, 2013

On June 14 the State Minister for Reintegration visited Samtatskaro. On that day, local Muslims did not participate in the prayers at the prayer house. The prayers were held by the representatives of the Muslim governance who had arrived from Adjara. Parmen Tseskladze’s mother told the Kakheti Information Center, “The reason why my child does not go out for prayers is because people are against them. The governor of our village asks people to warn us not to go to the prayer house. When the whole village says you shouldn’t – you shouldn’t.”⁵³

The media recorded a dialogue between the representatives of the local government and Paata Zakareishvili. In his statement the minister said:

*[..] if I have to start doing trips from Tbilisi for issues like this, that means that the state does not exist. Some say there are prayers; some say there aren’t. The reason I came here is to find out for myself. I will come again. This is an emotional day; some may refrain from talking, while others to the contrary: act artificially.*⁵⁴

Mr. Paata Zakareishvili attended the Muslim prayers. After the prayers were finished, in the presence of the Minister the Deputy Mufti of Georgi , Adam Shantidze said that the Samtatskaro Muslims were not attending the prayers due to the existing tensions in the village, However, he also mentioned that the parties had come to an agreement and that the prayer house would carry on functioning normally:

*The Friday prayers were held without any complications. I would like to use this opportunity to thank everyone who contributed to solving this misunderstanding. Unfortunately, the local Muslims could not attend the prayers. Some are not at home, while some are not ready to attend due to the three-week psychological stress. They were waiting for today’s prayers to be held and from now on everything will carry on the way it used to. All of the misunderstandings are over. There has been an agreement, and the prayer house will continue functioning as usual.*⁵⁵

4.2.6. The intervention in Khoja’s house and the threats against him: June 28, 2013

On June 28, prayers were conducted at the Samtatskaro prayer house with the participation of the representatives of the Mufti governance, and local, Khoja, and his sons. In the evening, after the departure of the guests, a big group of local Christians broke into Suliko Khozrevanidze’s house and demanded that he shut the prayer house down. They threatened him and his family by saying that if he

⁵² Statement by Public Defender:

<http://www.ick.ge/articles/14873-i.html>

⁵³ Kakheti Information Center, 15.06.2013

<http://www.ick.ge/articles/14649-jja.html>;

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=EinFw_H84t8#t=36

⁵⁴ Kakheti Information Center, 15.06.2013

<http://www.ick.ge/articles/14649-jja.html>;http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=iSBEYYmsoEo

⁵⁵ Kakheti Information Center, 15.06.2013

<http://www.ick.ge/articles/14649-jja.html>; http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=aq75lw2l-WE

did not close the prayer house, they would burn their house down or banish them from the village. The police were mobilized and came to the house.

Interviews that were recorded during the course of the incident and the research, provide identical stories from Suliko Khozrevanidze's and his family members' recollections:

It was around six when, while sitting at home, we looked outside and saw up to 200 people in the yard. I asked what they wanted, why they had come; they said they came to evict us. They were rigorously asking for Suliko "Bring him out," they were saying, "we've come to stone him." They could have broken into the home. Suliko's sister was there as well, otherwise they probably would have run me over when I fell down. I have injuries on my leg. ...But we were being told from above that they would deal with everything that no one would come to us, and that no one would bother us, but look at the situation we are in today. I don't know what will happen after. We cannot go home out of fear; it will dawn on us like this. What else we can do? – Emine Khozrevanidze, wife of Suliko Khozrevanidze.

Demur Kozrevanidze, Khoja's son said, "When I came, I saw that people had already entered the yard. It was mayhem: people fighting and threatening, 'We will evict you. You will no longer live here within the next 24 hours. Pack your stuff and leave.'"

They were breaking into our houses. Children were crying and screaming. That was when the police helped; they took them out of gates and then the police stood in the doorways and were not letting people inside the gates. They were cursing at us: showing total disrespect. They threatened that they would never again let us go into markets, or out onto the streets, that they would burn us down that night that they would pour petroleum, set us on fire, and burn us down. – Natela Makharadze, Suliko khozrevidze's sister

Today was Friday. The Muslim governance representative had arrived. We went to pray. No one had said anything. After six, a crowd rushed to my house; they came up to the doors. They threatened that they would evict us. Even now they are sending us information that I won't be able to herd the cattle, and that they will cut off our water, and we won't be permitted to go shopping. They demanded us to move out in 24 hours. The reason for all of this is that I prayed and my sons prayed with me." – Suliko Khozrevanidze, Khoja.⁵⁶

In the interview recorded during the course of the research, Suliko Khozrevanidze says that it was the Muslim Governance that misled him. "[...] they told me they had dealt with everything, that no one would say anything to me, either in the district or in the local government. But there were many people breaking in, shouting that they would kill and evict us; they were calling me bribed". According to Suliko Khozrevanidze, it was pity that other Muslims did not support him, but he has doubts that there were threats towards other Muslims as well.

Emine Khozrevanidze criticized the actions of the police:

The police were here in 10 minutes. They were probably already here, otherwise they could not have arrived so soon from the district. The crowd was standing there for quite a long time and no one told them even once to disperse, although, the police did help us to remove them from the yard. I fell down, felt sick and that was the reason they backed off.

⁵⁶ Kakheti Information Center, 29.05.2013

<http://www.ick.ge/articles/14818--video.html>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=Ci0yZtSKISE

It's noteworthy that in the video materials recorded during the incident, policemen say that the day was not marked by any conflict.⁵⁷

The Ministry of Interior Affairs started an investigation under Article 151 of the Criminal Code.

Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili touched on this issue at the press conference on July 3:

I want to address the residents; they need to abide by the law. We will absolutely protect the rights of religious minorities in all of Georgia. I think whatever is taking place in the country now, and specifically in Dedoplistskaro, is a reminiscent of the nine-year rule and very often artificially incited. In most of the cases these things used to be covered up previously and revealed themselves only today. We have to abide by the law. In most cases we will deal with these issues through negotiations, and we will make the other residents stop hindering the Muslim population from praying. We are a tolerant nation; it has never been a problem in Georgia to build a Mosque and conduct a prayer. This is also probably a reminiscent from post-Soviet space, where Atheism was predominantly established. Later, during the previous government, we had artificial order. I think we will easily deal with this; there is a way out. Similar things have happened in Batumi and Marneuli as well, but we will manage this and deal with it via strict legal measures.⁵⁸

4.2.7. Khoja leaves the village and prayers cease in the prayer house

On July 8, a local, Khoja Suliko Khozrevanidze, left Samtatskaro Village. In his interview Khoja said:

I assume the village will settle down now. We don't go to the prayer house, but there are still threats coming in everyday, so that we don't change our mind and dare go. I have health issues because of so much stress. My son lives in Adjara; I will go there and recover. I am on my way now.

In his statement, S. Khozrevanidze said that he left his family in the village and hopes that as time goes, the situation in the village will cool off.⁵⁹

4.2.8. The post-conflict situation and the village today

After June 28, no Friday prayers have been conducted in the village of Samtatskaro.

On July 10, 2013, there was a meeting held at the Patriarchate of Georgia, which was attended by Samtatskaro residents, as well as, representatives of several non-governmental organizations. Patriarch spoke about the artificial character of the conflict:

⁵⁷ Kakheta Information Center, 29.05.2013

<http://www.ick.ge/articles/14818--video.html>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=Ci0yZtSKISE

⁵⁸ Kakheta Information Center, 05.08.2013

<http://www.ick.ge/articles/14914-main.html>

⁵⁹ Kakheta Information Center, 08.08.2013

<http://www.ick.ge/articles/14953-i.html>

I was surprised to hear there were some misunderstandings taking place. In reality, there is no conflict; some people just want it to be that way. Some ignite the disagreement on purpose. [...] I will never allow anyone to be oppressed. So whoever wants to pray can come to me and pray. We are of one flesh and blood; you should spare each other and help. We should not create this artificially; we should not listen to provokers.⁶⁰

According to the local Adjarian, Piruz Jayan, who attended the meeting by himself, the meeting with Patriarch was not attended by those Muslims from the village who used to attend the prayers at Parmen Tsetskladze's house. It should also be mentioned that he does not agree to the idea of building a prayer house in Samtatskaro.

Today, the prayer house in Samtatskaro is not functioning anymore. According to Suliko Khozrevanidze, local Muslims have no willpower left to open a prayer house after the conflict. He said, *"Threats towards people are common now and everyone is refraining. If the Mufti governance does not open the prayer house themselves, we won't have the strength anymore. We can't go against the will of the population"*.

Locals say that no one speaks of the conflict anymore.

According to the explanations of active Muslim prayers, the relations are not as neighborly as they were previously. Tsiala Tsetskladze says in the interview, which was recorded during the research, *"[...] we don't have as good of relations now, as we used to have before. They tell us to be the way we were before, but we tell them, "you forced us to comply with your wishes and ran us out of village; you called us Tatars"*.

4.2.9. The Muslim Community position on the conflict

When conducting the research in October, the interviews taken from local Muslims, show that during the course of the conflict pressure was put on them by local Christians. A reason that they provide for their conformity is that they are trying to avoid conflict. Parmen Tsetskladze's mother said that on the day of the conflict his son was warned that if he had gone out they would have bitten him up. There were no cases of aggression against Parmen, due to the fact that there are many Adjarian Muslims living in his region, who stood up for him. Tsiala Tsetskladze recalls several facts of threats being made against Parmen Tsetskladze, including the one from the son of the Village Trusee, Gulnara Nadirashvili.

It's interesting to review the reasons the Muslim community has provided for giving up the fight for the prayer house.

"[...] Ingilos disturbed everyone because of this. We said there was nothing worth fighting or waging wars for. When I saw such a thing was happening, I could not communicate my messages with anyone.[...] I did not really want to get involved in a war. It would have been good if they had allowed us to open it. The united Friday prayer is the most rewarding one. You can't pray alone during that prayer, you should have at least five people." – a Muslim gentleman, 70 years old

"Our people were intimidated and could not enter the place anymore." – Local Muslim lady.

"This is a Christian village and nobody wants to speak up anymore about opening a prayer house. Why not? We still want to have a prayer house, but we don't want the situation to get tense. [...] we did not

⁶⁰ Tabula, 10.07.2013

<http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/72835-ilia-meore-sinamdvilesi-aravitari-utanxmoeba-ar-arsebobs>

want to fight for religion. We are still conducting Friday prayers, but only at home. In addition, it is not only this village that is against it, the whole district is.” – a Muslim prayer.

“Even children bullied each other about this. That is why the people were against it. Our people want to pray at the prayer house as much as Christians want to, but everyone carried on praying at home.” - Local Muslim lady.

4.2.10. The conflict assessment by the Orthodox community

Christians’ explanations recorded during the fieldwork in the village of Samtatskaro, later on in October, are similar to the evaluations that the Christian community had in the course of the conflict and their attitudes when rethinking the issue did not change.

This will not be allowed. Bad things may happen and several Ingilos may even be detained for this; building a mosque won’t be allowed here. This is impermissible; they should leave these people alone. [...] there [in Adjara] are mosques. Why don’t they go there and pray? They should leave these people alone. How can a mosque be established in Kakheti? – a local Christian gentleman.

“No one will bear Minaret and their shouts here.” – a local Christian Lady

“There were no hinderances before the prayer house was opened. I, myself, am embarrassed by this story, by the way. Kakheti has not had a mosque for this long. Why should we, the Adjarians, do this now? Why should we be given a bad name?” – Atheist Adjarian.

In the interview recorded during the course of the research, the Village Trustee, Gulnara Nadirashvili, says no conflict took place in the village and denies that any violent act was observed against Muslims during the course of the conflict. According to her, there are almost no Muslims in the village any more. Moreover, according to the Trustee, the local Muslims see the term Adjarian Muslim as an offense, as the majority of them converted to Christianity and there are only two to three people who have preserved their faith in Islam. In response to the researchers’ question about what her position would be if 50 Muslim prayers were to demanded that a prayer house be opened in the village, G. Nadiradze answered that in Summer no Muslim had given their consent to open the prayer house, If they had, there would not have been a problem: “They could open a prayer house. Even if there have been three people, they would have had right to open a prayer house.”

A Dedoplistkaro Municipality Council member, Avtandil Shanidze, has the same position. He says that there was not any confrontation, nor has the intervention happened in Suliko Khozrevanidze’s house, and that this information was falsely spread through the media. According to him, the reason why the prayer house in Samtatskaro was not opened was that there were no Muslims in the village.

[...] we are not the type of people who would stand in somebody’s way because of religion. We know that first, it is important that there are prayers and after it does not matter where they pray. They don’t have a parish and that’s it. They can come out and say they want to pray. They can bring people who want to pray and state their opinion.

In the interview with the local priest, father Nikoloz, the clergyman said that the conflict was portrayed falsely and that he has not seen a single aggressive person in the village.

4.3. Assessments of the causes of the conflict by the involved parties

4.3.1. The political context of the conflict

The statements made by local community members, clergymen and government representative give us an idea of several political theories attempting to explain the ongoing conflict in Samtatskaro. The first theory is connected to the local post-election context. The second one sees the link of the process to the threats of Islamisation coming from the foreign powers.

It's noteworthy that here the conflict parties don't mention the first theory as openly and directly as it has been the case with Nigvziani and Tsintskaro. Moreover the interviews recorded from the regular local population do not say anything about the conflict having been provoked due to the elections or by the the major political in its aftermath. Among the people interviewed, only the Dedoplistkaro Municipality City Council Deputy's, Avtandil Shanidze's, and Suliko Khozrevanidze's opinions fell within the frames of the above-mentioned theory. However, their opinions do not coincide with the theories developed in Nigvziani and Tsintskaro; specifically, those that talk about the promise made during the elections by the previous government about opening the prayer house or the version in which the conflict was deliberately provoked by the United National Movement after the elections. To the contrary, their deliberations are against these versions. The City Council Deputy explains:

Yet 10-15 years ago, when he arrived, Suliko Khozrevanidze, had this wish, but we told him he did not have a parish and it did not have future. He realized it then and settled down, but lately he was given more hope. He probably thought that there would be more restrictions during the previous government and felt freer only when the new government came into power. That was probably his thought.

Suliko Khozrevanidze gives the following explanation:

This was an artificial type of conflict. [...] everything was in the interest of particular people. [...] according to our faith, we should abide by the government, whether or not their policies are acceptable to us. [...]the United National Movement probably wanted to overthrow the new government and wanted this to happen this way. The local governor is from the Georgian Dream party.

According to the second, more dominant theory, the local Christians say that the escalation of the conflict happened with the help of the foreign forces. They think that the fact that Samtatskaro is a border village was deliberately used as a condition. Although, their assessments in this regard are not concrete and are probably fed by the historic narratives of collective consciousness on Saingilo.

It should have been opened somewhere else. They never wanted to open a prayer house. It was just inspired from the top. Even the house was bought for them for this. [...] there are Adjarians forced to move in the Sagarejo district as well, why was the prayer house not opened there? This was probably in real exacerbated on purpose as this village is close to the border. - Samtatskaro Public School principle, Varlam Tagishvili.

"This village is on the border of Azerbaijan and that's the reason why they moved in Adjarians here: to shed the blood. Azerbaijan is the country that wants to seize our lands." – a local Christian gentleman.

The theory of foreign threats is believed by the local clergyman, father Nikoloz. See the fragment from his speech recorded in the course of conducting interviews for the research:

[...] how do you think country conquests happen? It happens in places where there is no communication. Dividing and conquering is easier. [Remember] how were we living before? If

somebody is annoyed by the bell ringing, they can leave the country and go. That is how this country used to be. [...] everyone knew what would follow the acquisition of funds by them. Turkey is ready to have strong support in Georgia. If a war starts, they won't say they are going to conquer Georgia, – they will say the religion is demanding it from them. Every Muslim will stand by them. These are the security measures.

4.3.2. Adjarian Muslim identity and the Muslims's indoctrination in the village of Samtatskaro

The analysis of the statements by the local community members shows that the identity of an “Adjarian Muslim” is unacceptable to them and often described with derogatory epithets (much like in other regions of Georgia). Attitudes of this nature towards Adjarian Muslims are especially intimidating and painful for them. A local Adjarian Muslim gentleman said in his statement:

We are Adjarians and they say we are Tatars⁶¹. I am Georgian and I'd do anything for Georgia, But I am a Muslim too – it is not in conflict with anything. I won't change my faith anyways, even if they hang me, but there are people who change their religion upon the very first resistance.

The words by a local Muslim woman were even more emotional:

They made an argument on this basis at school, apparently. My child came and asked, “Mother, who am I?” That meant that something had happened. I answered he was Georgian. “Am I a Muslim?” he asked. I answered we had not baptized him or anything yet, he would grow up and decide for himself. I said to say to whomever asks that he was not a Muslim yet. Obviously, something happened among the kids, otherwise, a 5th grader wouldn't even think of such a thing.

Local Christians think that Adjarian Muslims should necessarily convert to Christianity. In their opinion, the existing historic narratives justify the restriction of the rights of Muslim Adjarians. A local Christian gentleman says:

Previously, it was them killing and forcing people to convert to Islam. Things are different now. Now, they should adopt Christianity. [...] they should understand that they are Christians and shall remain Christians. [...] you shall be baptized if you know your ancestors were Christians.

The attitudes of the Muslims who have converted are even more radical on this subject:

For me, as for any Georgian man, it is unacceptable to have a Minaret in this village. I am ashamed of such a Georgian. How can you want to pray in Turkish in Georgia? Pray in whatever language you understand. If you ask what they pray about, they will not even be able to answer. They are only reciting. We all know the history, right? We were forced to convert into Islam. Somebody says that person is Georgian to the same level as I am. That's not true. – an Adjarian Christian gentleman under 30.

The opinions of the teachers of the local public schools are of specific interest. When asked a question about whether the local Muslims should have the right to open a prayer house or not, the school principle, Varlam Tagishvili, answered: “they have a constitutional right to do that, but not a moral right.” The argument he makes is based on the history of oppressed Christians in Saingilo:

⁶¹ Derogatory address to a Muslim

In the region of Kakheti there are Azerbaijanians living on my grandparents' land. My father was 3 when he was exiled. Apparently, they were oppressing Christians very harshly and forcing them to go to mosques. They apparently left the place in the 30s. This is exactly the problem: we ran away from there. Why should the same thing happen here?

The deputy principal has a similar feelings of the situation. Lamara Mnatobishvili says, “[...] they left the place because it was a Muslim state and they were being oppressed there. They came here with the intention to pray as Christians, but the existence of a mosque, even here, is unacceptable for them.”

This opinion is more extreme because of the the attitudes of the church. When asked about the equality of Christians and Muslims, the local clergyman, father Nicoloz, responded:

Can we ever treat all the languages equally? Shouldn't Orthodoxy have some level of superiority? [...] Christianity and Georgian-ness are equated. Can you evict me after I've let you in? No one stops them from praying, but whatever they do is a provocation for Minatert, mullah and shouting.

4.4. Assessment of the role of the major actors in regulating the conflict presented by the involved sides

4.4.1. Assessments by the local Muslim community

According to the Muslim community, the local government contributed to the escalation of the conflict. They say village trustee, Gulnara Nadirashvili, was involved in the conflict and took a side. The local, Khoja Suliko Khozrevanidze, recalls:

She said, 'I am against you praying'. And she was against the establishment of the prayer house at all. She said we should pray in their houses. According to her, it was not necessary to pray in an official way; it is a Christian village and everyone should convert into Christianity.

The mother of Parmen Tsetskhladze, Tsiala Tsetskhladze, says that the village trustee was encouraging Ingilos: “The governor would go with this people and support them. We don't want the prayer house and the mosque,” she would say, “if you want them, go to Adjara.”

According to the Muslim community, the involvement of the central government was not sufficient. In some people's minds, the passive role of the government can be explained by the argument that it did not want the prayer house in Samtatskaro to be established either; the government was showing solidarity towards them.

4.4.2. Evaluations by the local Orthodox community

The local Christians do not show a particular loyalty towards the government. Some even develop an opinion that establishing a prayer house was a government-driven process, which aimed to obtain political support. According to their evaluations, the fact that the prayer house is not functioning in the village any more dignifies their resistance. A Christian man said, “*I know a mosque won't be built here. It's decided. I don't know what will happen if the government changes, but it's impossible for it to happen now.*” Christians claim the government played its role when helping to prevent the violence. According to a local Christian woman, without the effort of the police and local government, the Muslims and Christians would have killed each other.

5. Assessment of the role of the State in resolving the religious conflicts

5.1. Broad review

This chapter analyses the enacted state policies for a peaceful and fair regulation of the religious conflicts in Nigvziani, Tsintskaro and Samtatskaro. The analysis uses five main criteria guided by the principles of efficiency, fairness and secularism.

These criteria are: 1. *An efficient and timely regulation of the conflict*, 2. *A peaceful and fair resolution of the conflict*. 3. *Protection of the secular framework*. 4. *Ensuring the freedom and equality of religion*. 5. *Implementation of general positive actions to prevent religious conflicts*. These criteria are part of a liberal, civil and secular discourse and complement each other.

As it soon became clear the state did not have any clear cut strategy on how to resolve the conflict justly and to respect to religious freedom. Its effort, however, was only aimed on preventing further tensions based on religious grounds. At the same time, State officials focused their attention on conspiracy theories related to conflict and failed to comprehend of the real causes of the conflict which hindered them from adequately and fairly reacting to the violations. Despite the overriding evidence of human rights violations against the Muslim community, State officials kept referring to the importance of protecting the rights of the majority (see the Chapter 2.2.2).

During the conflict, the State refused to intervene as a guarantor and delegated this role to the dominant religious actors, or rather to the dominant religious organization. This, however, overrides the principle of secularism and resulted in the unfair treatment of the minorities.

The State's intervention has been quite limited to passively mobilizing the police in the regions where the conflict was escalating, as well as to dispatching public officials and facilitating meetings between State representatives and the religious leaders. Moreover, the State only made political statements and did not stop the perpetrators from committing further violent acts, nor did it intervene to bring these perpetrators to justice. In this light, the statements made by the Prime Minister highlighting the importance of defending minority rights and reacting on irregularities can be seen as merely declarative, as they did not lead to any concrete actions.

The negative results of this policy are particularly visible throughout the dynamic analysis of the conflict.

1. Following Nigvziani, similar religious conflicts occurred in the villages of Tsintkaro and Samtatskharo where people from mixed religious minorities live. The authorities could not stop these conflicts from occurring, which considering its passive role, was rather predictable.

2. Research findings also indicate that every consecutive conflict has been more severe in terms of human rights violations and that the incidents had become more and more prevalent. The duration of the conflict as well as the aggression from the dominant religious group (*e.g. the conflict in Samtitskaro lasted for over one month and was marked with number of violent incidents*) confirms this observation.

3. The conflict resolution in every consequent case was happening on the expense of more and more concessions from the side of the minority groups. Specifically, in Tskinstakro it was agreed that the

Muslims living in other villages would no longer have the right to pray. While in Samtiskaro, the Muslim community was forced to give up the idea of maintaining the prayer house owing to the threats and heightened tensions (see the Chapters 4.2.2; 4.2.4; 4.2.7; 4.2.9).

Further analysis of the conflict's dynamics depicts an even more negative picture. Contrary to the situation in Nigvziani and Tsintskaro where the state acted passively and did fulfill its obligations, state officials played a different role in the Samtiskaro conflict⁶². In particular, representatives of the Ministry of Interior Affairs (MIA) and of the local government acted as a party in the conflict and thereby breached the principle of religious neutrality (see the Chapter 4.2.4). Despite the fact that the given paper does not present an assessment of events of August 26, 2013 in the village of Chela, Adigeni Municipality, where the state (the central government) itself demolished the minaret and accomplished this via using its repressive tools (disproportionate usage of force against the Muslim community, detainment and prosecution of Muslims),⁶³ consideration of the Chela incident in connection to the three proposed religious conflicts, shows that the positive obligations of the government were transformed into the negative and the human right violation was intensified. This will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

5.2. Analysis of the state policies enacted with the purpose of timely and efficient resolution of the conflict

Throughout the conflicts in Nigvziani, Tsintskaro and Samtatskaro, several provisions of the Criminal Code of Georgia and the Administrative Code of Georgia were violated by the dominant religious group. Therefore, adequate and timely reactions from the authorities were required.

There are evidences that the members of the Nigvziani community repeatedly threatened Muslim residents and on November 2, 2012 Christians forcibly entered the mosque while attempting to stop religious rituals with violence (see the Chapter 2.2.2). Video footage and interviews recorded between November 29-30, 2012 in Tsintskaro also indicate attempts of the local Christian community to intervene in religious rituals (see the Chapter 3.2.2). The Samtiskaro conflict was lengthy and therefore counted more cases of violence. On May 24, 2013 local Christian residents trespassed the Muslim prayer houses and forcibly removed some of the religious objects while planned prayers were suspended (see the Chapter 4.2.2). On May 31, 2013 residents of Samtiskaro blocked the road leading to the village and the members of the Muslim governance were not allowed to pass through. Local residents used threats and force against them (see the Chapter 4.2.3). On July 7, 2013 allegedly some pressure was put on the local Khoja Suliko Kozreveni from the side of MIA personnel (see the Chapter 4.2.4), and on June 28, 2013 a large number of Christian residents forcibly entered his house with the demand to close down the prayer house (see the Chapter 4.2.6). They threatened to burn down his

⁶² Guidelines for review of Legislation pertaining to religion or belief, prepared by the OSCE/ODIHR advisory panel of experts on freedom of religion or belief in consultation with the European Commission for democracy through law (Venice commission), adopted by the Venice commission, Venice, 18-19 June 2004. Available at: <http://www.osce.org/odihr/13993>

⁶³ Joint Statements by the non-governmental organisation, accessible on: <http://gdi.ge/?p=403>

house and evict him from the village. Later on Suliko Kozreveni was actually forced to leave the village (see the Chapter 4.2.7).

Prima facie these violent incidents indicate the violation of the Criminal Code, namely, article 142 (violation of equality of humans), article 150 (coercion), article 151 (threatening), article 152 (encroachment upon right to choose place of residence), article 155 (illegal interference into performing religious rite) as well as the violation of article 166 (hooliganism) of the Administrative Code of Georgia. Despite being on the spot the police didn't respond to these violations, but passively observed the unfolding events.⁶⁴ Subsequently, the state could not ensure an efficient investigation of the alleged human rights violations. According to the official letter received from the Ministry of Interior Affairs on September 30, 2013, no illegal acts disturbing Muslim religious activities, violence, threats or offenses towards the local residents were detected on November 2, 2012. These were attested by the testimonies of the incident witnesses. Currently, the investigation of the mentioned case is happening under the Article 155 of the Criminal Code. According to MIA, the Tetrtskaro regional governance received information on a verbal offense towards the prayer-holding in the Village Tsintskaro on November 30, 2012. But due to the fact that the given information did not bear any signs of violations of the Criminal Code the investigation has not started.⁶⁵ With regard to Samtatskaro conflict MIA said that there they are currently investigating the case of illegally violating the religious activities under the Article 155 of the Criminal Code.⁶⁶

In this respect the Ministry of Justice stated on 5 of November 2012 that the authorities did not want to demonstrate their power and that the incidents should have been regulated by the religious leaders first (see the Chapter 2.2.2). This statement, however, is wrong in the light of several legal and political arguments: 1. The non-intervention of the police breached the requirement by law as well as their positive obligation to safeguard the rights of others when they were violated. 2. This police inaction has led to impunity and resulted in a stir-up of the conflict. 3. The State's refusal to use its power was discriminatory towards the religious minorities, since it was only used in relation to the dominant religious actors. Also during the Chela conflict the state oppressed the rights of the protesting local Muslim community. 4. The state has neglected its duty to safeguard human rights and pertinently violated the equality principle where secularism is based upon. The State also diminished its public role and lost its legitimacy, as it failed to stop the counter protest organized by the clergymen during the International Day against Homophobia. The events of 17 May 2012 have fallen beyond the paradigm of the State to protect individual groups and this has become a symbol of the Church occupying secular public space.

⁶⁴ Author's note: this Statement has been shared by the nongovernmental organisations and Public Defender's office of Georgia. <http://gyla.ge/geo/news?info=1630>; <http://ombudsman.ge/index.php?page=1001&lang=0&id=1744>

⁶⁵ Author's note: The investigation of the case of cutting the cross on the cemetery was aborted, with the argument that the offender's act has not caused a significant damage (150 GEL) to the state

⁶⁶ A letter received on request by the Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC) from the MIA (#2161149) on October 30, 2013

5.3. Analysis of the state policies enacted for peaceful and fair resolution of the conflict

For the fair and peaceful resolution of the conflict the state, on the one hand, needs to enforce the rule of law and ensure human rights protection, while on the other, it needs to implement adequate policies for raising people's awareness with the purpose of building solidarity in society.

An assessment of the implemented state policies, however, indicates a number of drawbacks:

1. Issues related to the identification of the problem and understanding the bigger picture;
2. Inadequate understanding of the rights that both parties portray; and
3. A passive role of the State and its delegation to the religious groups.

The reasons to why the policies the state enacted with the purpose of resolving the conflict can be assessed as unfair is that the state denied the real existence of the conflicts, as well as the fact that the dominant religious groups were violating the rights of Muslim Community and in addition to that that the state itself ignored the real problems at spot, the different conspiracy theories being the underlying reasons to that. The state uniquely relied on political rhetoric, disregarded the legal dimension, and therefore failed enact the policies respecting justice and human rights principles. After analyzing the problems identified throughout the conflicts, it became obvious that on a political and social level there is intolerance against a specific religious group. Even though these attitudes should be altered, it is less likely that the State has any plans to do so. During our analysis, it became clear the State has unfair funding policies towards the different religious groups. It also ignored the principles of religious neutrality and neglected the practices of indoctrination of Adjarians as well as proselytism in the public schools of Tsintskharo and Samtistkaro.

During the conflict the state officials would say the rights of religious minorities were not being violated (see the Chapters 2.2.2), and state that the majority was entitled to their rights as well. They would also say it was necessary to keep a reasonable balance between the interests of both groups.

In the circumstances where the functioning of the Muslim prayer house was not coming into conflict with the legitimate public interests (opening the prayer house was not connected to noise or to allocation of funds from the state budget) statements on the rights of the majority being infringed (especially when the complaints of the dominant group on opening the prayer house were totally illegal and unjustified) were a violation of the fundamental principles of liberal democracy, which implies restriction of the wishes, of the passions of the majority in favor of the minority. Other than the statements made by the Prime Minister (see the Chapters 3.2.2; 4.2.6), which needs to be positively assessed, other government officials did not provide for the protection of the religious minorities.

The state has delegated its role to settle the conflict entirely to religious actors, while itself it only assumed the functions of a facilitator. An agreement to settle the Nigvziani conflict was reached among the representatives of the Christian and Muslim Communities, and their religious leaders at the Patriarchate and was only later communicated to the Committee on Human Rights and Civil Integration. The Committee, however, has not deliberated on the human rights violations that took place during the conflict and failed to produce an adequate assessment of them (see the Chapter 2.2.2).

An agreement on Tsintskaro village incident was also reached only among the religious leaders, the state only voiced the decision (see the Chapter 3.3.2). No agreement has been reached in Samtitskaro and the conflict only receded after the requests of the Muslim community were denied. This, however, has been assessed as a resolution of the conflict at the last meeting at the Patriarchat (see the Chapter 4.2.8).

The statements by the Christian religious servicemen and the attitudes they have been expressing throughout the course of the research, showed the discriminative and intolerant approach they have against the minority (see the Chapters 2.3.4; 4.3.2), at what time delegating the conflict resolution to the Christian clergymen was not a fair move from the side of the government, which should have been obvious from the very beginning.

Despite the fact that the terms of the agreement (the agreement reached in Nigvziani and Tsintskaro prohibited Muslims from different villages to pray in the established prayer houses either in Nigvziani or in Tsintskaro) or the actual situation on ground (in Samtatskaro Muslims refused to open a prayer house due to pressure and threats) after the conflict were representing the violation of the rights of the minority, the government did not ensure fulfillment of its positive responsibilities⁶⁷ or did not bring them in line with the human rights standards.

The local residents of Nigvziani and Tsintskaro positively assessed the fact that, after the confrontation, they were allowed to open the Muslim prayer house. Nevertheless, the state failed to accommodate the rights of religious minorities through its non-intervention and has thus failed to warrant the conflict from re-escalating.

By the same token, the state did not implement adequate informative politics to create peaceful and tolerant conditions for religious minorities. It also became clear that the lack of state policy resulted into frustration and alienation of the Christian community (see the Chapters 2.4.2; 3.4.2).

5.4. Violation of principles of secularism by the state during the conflict resolution

The principle of secularism means the separation of religious and state authorities, and the protection of religious neutrality when enacting government policies. Religion is a part of private space and therefore is a part of one's identity, its institutions are distances from the political authority. The State is a legitimate institute which executes power and justice. However, its aim remains to exercise this power while protecting human rights.

During the religious conflicts in Nigvziani, Tsintskaro and Samtitskaro the State refused to defend the rules of its liberal constitution, inter alia, safeguarding the right of religious minorities and distributing its functions to religious actors, namely, to the dominant church. This is contrary to the secular principles.

A clear example of this violation were the statements made and actions undertaken by the members of the local government of Nigvziani, Tsintskaro and Samtitskaro. In their interviews they indicate the will

⁶⁷ <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomReligion/Pages/IstandardsI3b.aspx>

to submit to the desires of the majority and, because of this loyalty, breached the principles of secularism (see the Chapters 3.2.2; 4.2.2-4.2.3). In their statement they supported the proposition to limit the rights of one religious group, and thus ignoring the principle of religious neutrality. Moreover, in Samtitskaro village, the village trustee sided with one of the conflict parties. According to the Muslim community he supported the protest of the local Christian community (see the Chapter 4.4.1).

The State officials often showed their loyalty to the dominant religious group. In this light, the statements made by Soso Djachvliani and Victor Djaparidze on December 4, 2012 are noteworthy (see the Chapter 3.2.2.). During the conflict in Nigviani, the head of the Committee on Human Rights and Civil Integration of the Parliament of Georgia identified themselves with the dominant group, as they stated:

We are very tolerant and have a fore-bearing attitude, however, it is natural that Orthodox Church also has their own rights and it is possible to reach an agreement (see the Chapter 2.2.2).

Eka Beselia, on the meeting of November 3, 2012, said it was held with the blessing of the Patriarchate (see the Chapter 2.2.2). It was also stated that the Church was allowed to have an opportunity to exhaust the incident.

It is difficult to explain the reasons or the motives behind the violation of the principle of secularism. It might be that the State was showing its loyalty to the Church which enjoys high public support. Another reason might be that it represents the ideology of many State officials.

5.5. Understanding the conflict and importance of positive measures for its prevention

As mentioned above, the State failed to produce a comprehensive vision that would enable to identify the underlying reasons and settle the religious conflict. The analysis suggested that there are several issues that underline these religious conflicts. It includes the state policy concerning the different religious groups, which has a long historical legacy. The State does not have a proportionate tax and financial policy for religious minorities. It therefore often failed to investigate crimes with religious motives and to limit the practices of proselytism and indoctrination. Statements collected from the Christian and Muslim community indicated that the fear the mosque was funded by external actors would be unsubstantiated if there were rules governing the funding of the religious group (see the Chapter 2.3.1). The findings also revealed that the 'Adjarian identity' is not acceptable at schools as it conflicts with the mainstream religion. Moreover, they often use hate speech when talking about the Muslim community. The Muslim community itself speaks of cases of proselytism and a discriminatory approach towards them (see the Chapter 2.3.3; 3.3.4; 4.3.2).

The interviews with members of the Nigvizani community revealed an utter disregard for the interest of the minority group, which requires additional research and due attention (see the Chapter 2.3.2).

Analysis of the interviews also suggested that the interest of the religious group have been neglected and that it requires due attention from the State.

It is important for the State to review its existing policies with a view to resolve and prevent the conflicts

6. Recommendations to the Georgian government on religious conflicts

Considering the analysis of the underpinning reasons for the political and religious conflicts described in chapter 5, a set of recommendations aimed at regulating and preventing the conflict is presented below.

6.1. Recommendations to the Ministry of Interior of Georgia

During the conflicts in Nigvziani, Tsintskaro and Samtitskaro, the police took on a passive role and it did not stop various offences throughout this period. According to the public information from the MIA, an investigation has been opened into these alleged violations. The investigation on the offences, however, has been suspended without any grounded reasons.

Considering the above-mentioned and with a view to safeguard the principles of rule of law and prevent further conflicts, the MIA should timely intervene in order to prevent and effectively investigate the crimes. This while using adequate and legal measures. At the same time sensitivity of the situation and the sentiments of the public should not undermine the rule of law. It is important that the State submits the results of the investigations that were initiated in the cases of Nigvziani and Samtitskaro. At this point, it is important that the investigation is efficient, accountable and transparent. It is also important for MIA staff to receive training on religious neutrality, secularism and religious freedoms.

6.2. Recommendations to the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia

Practices of indoctrination at Nigvziani, Tsintskaro and Samtitskaro have occurred at public schools, and some have filed complaints against these issues. The law on general education of Georgia bans religious indoctrination, proselytism and forced assimilation,⁶⁸ however, in practice these provisions are not observed. These practices have been manifested covertly.

Analysis of the interviews with teachers showed that these principles are violated, alongside with unlawful practices of using religious objects at school, collective praying at school and discriminating Muslims on the grounds of their religion. Teacher's statements contain messages of Islamophobia and it is highly probable that these are expressed during the teaching process.

In order to establish civic and secular values and establish some tolerance, it is important that the Ministry uses effective monitoring mechanisms at the schools, especially schools with students of mixed ethnic backgrounds. It is equally important to pay more attention to the Georgian literature and history process. Considering the scale and nature of the issue, the government must also make efforts to raise awareness of religious issues.

⁶⁸ Law of Georgia on General Education, Article 13 (Neutrality and Non-discrimination); Article 18 (Freedom of Religion)

6.3 Recommendations to the Office of the State Minister for Reintegration

Considering the competencies of the State Ministry of Reintegration, it is important that the Ministry reinforces information campaign in conflict zones targeting the settlements with mixed religious or ethnical composition, to facilitate tolerant environment and respect for freedom of religion. Of particular interest are the regions populated by the Adjarian Muslims, in this respect, as the analysis of the religious conflicts in Nigvziani, Tsintskaro and Samtatskaro showed, the degree of intolerance towards the Adjarian Muslims is overwhelming. For the Christian majority, as well as for the religious leaders, the identity of a non-Christian Georgian is not acceptable. The study of the conflict has also revealed that the Muslims are being indoctrinated. The scale and the ideology of this process contributes to self-victimization among the Georgian Muslims. Self-identification within the community of the Georgian Muslims is traumatic and therefore they tend to conform to the human right violations by the dominant groups. This was vividly expressed in Muslim explanations throughout the course of the incident (see the Chapter 4.2.9). The refusal by Muslim community of the village Samtatskaro to practice civil rights was an obvious example of this.

6.4. Recommendations to the Ministry of Justice of Georgia

For the religious group to enjoy their rights it is important to make the necessary changes to the law which would ensure a fair legal tax and financial environment. This process requires major revisions. In addition, it is important to ensure a high involvement of the religious groups to legitimise this process.

Consideration of the suggestions and opinions submitted in relation to the draft law as well as the timely submission of the draft law on anti-discrimination, will aide to combat all forms of discrimination.

6.5. Recommendations to the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure and Local Self-Governing bodies

During the conflict in Nigvziani, Tsintskaro and Samtatskaro, the local government took a side in the conflict, often stirring it up. This became well clear in the case of Samtatskaro (see above). Members of the local self-governing bodies violated the principles of secularism and made statements insinuating the current conflict had to be resolved in favour of the majority. Unfortunately, in none of these cases the members of the local self-governing bodies were held responsible for their actions.

At the same time, research on Nigvziani, Tsintskaro and Samtatskaro showed that the participation of the local Muslim community into the local self-governing bodies has been problematic. The interests and needs of the local government bodies are not duly considered (e.g. budget spending of the local municipality, designating space for the cemetery of the local Muslim population, employment of Muslims). With a view to implement these views, it is important for State to carry out a relevant educational and informational policy to increase civic awareness on its employers.

Moreover, it is important that the local government is able to decide in a timely manner on the issues that will ensure full enjoyment of civil and social life in Nigvziani by the Muslim community, including allocating designated areas for cemeteries and water pipes to be transferred under the ownership of the environmental migrants.

The development of fair policies in Tsintskaro is important. It is equally important that minority groups are consulted throughout the process.

6.6. Recommendations to the Parliament of Georgia and political parties

In order to achieve religious freedoms based on equality, the State should review its religious policy and eradicate the legislative loopholes in relation to the funding of religious groups, the construction of religious buildings and taxation. The recommendations to the Ministry of Justice on implementing these legislative changes and policy on religion are also directed into the legislative body. At the same time, it is important for Parliament to adopt the law on combating all forms of discrimination and create a relevant legislative basis for it.

It is also important for Parliament to be more efficient in using mechanisms of parliamentary control and to make relevant assessments in line with human rights standards. It is also of the highest importance that the Members of Parliament safeguard the principle of secularism protected by the Church and will not resort to hate speech. In this direction, it will be useful for the political parties to elaborate on efficient mechanisms for self control.

Conclusion

The study of the conflicts which unfolded in the villages of Nigvziani, Tsintskaro and Samtatskaro showed that the government attempted to intervene in the dispute and resolve it in a timely manner. High ranking government officials issued considerable statements referring to the importance of protecting the religious pluralism and tolerance. Although, due to the fact that the state did not respond to the violations, and trusted clergymen with the conflict resolution, it failed to fulfill its exclusive function as a human rights defender. Such depreciation of the government's role caused the spread of the conflict to other regions, its intensification and the secular imbalance. The major state actors, those actively involved in the process of the resolution of the conflict, did not admit to the freedom of religion of the Muslim community being curbed. On the contrary, they were saying the freedom of religion of the dominant religious group was not respected which on its hand was unfair and incompatible with liberalism.

The discussed conflict demonstrated wide-scale problems regarding freedom of religion which exist within the country. It requires adequate reaction from the government and a re-evaluation of the religious policies in the state. The government assessed the ongoing conflicts as artificially provoked and isolated, and in doing so excluded the possibility of assessing them adequately and approaching the resolution in a complex manner.

In regard to ensuring religious freedom in the country it was a great step forward to keep the Muslim prayer houses functioning in Nigvziani and Tsintskaro. Although, the state of the Muslim community in the village of Samtatskaro requires the government to re-assess the situation and take adequate measures to protect their freedom of religion.

In addition, it is crucial that the government implements policies which will enable religious freedom to be fully practiced and the protection of the principle of secularism. With this in mind, we hope the government will consider the recommendations that were drawn within the framework of this study and take respective measures for their implementation.

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The article "Crisis of Secularism and Loyalty towards the Dominant Group: The Role of the Government in the 2012-2013 Religious Conflicts in Georgia" is written by the author of the study. Using the interdisciplinary research methodology different political and social contexts of the conflicts are analyzed. The given analysis is one of the interpretations of the conflict and is the final addition to the research.

The analysis of the social and political contexts of the religious conflicts unfolded in Georgia

The discourse analysis of the interviews conducted by the Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center in the course of the religious conflicts with the major actors reveal the social and political contexts, that were influencing the conflicts and conditioning them. The proposed article is an analyses the political aspects of the conflict and the problems related to the national-religious identities.

Power transition in government and its influence on the religious conflicts

The influence of the political context on the religious conflicts was revealed with different implications. The dominant group, including the state authorities and the clergy have often used the rhetoric that the conflict had been artificially inflated and that it had been used for political purposes.

Local Christians in Nigvziani and Tsintkaro villages often indicated that the previous government promised a prayer house to the Muslim Community in exchange of electoral support. It was also alleged that the religious conflicts are the result of political confrontation. These allegations are further reinforced by statements made by Archbishop Joseb and Father Saba Zhghenti. On a similar note, Priest Giorgi observed that the previous government limited the Church and the Church had been liberated after the elections.

The theory that the conflict was inflated by the UNM is widely shared in the current government, highlighting the fact that the State authorities and its affiliated groups had artificially provoked the conflict to let the situation escalate. The State authorities, however, did not submit any evidence to support this allegation.

It was not the aim of the research to test the validity of the given thesis; however, the systematic analysis of the conflict revealed that this theory is rather controversial. The influence of the given theory is smaller within the dominant discourse - and in case of Samtatskaro is almost non-existent. Contrary to what the dominant religious groups say the members of the Muslim Community, including the local religious servicemen, criticize the previous government and indicate that under their rule that they did not have the right to open a prayer house. Moreover, the Muslim Community is happier with the current government. Despite the opposition from the Christian Community, the current government had set a precedent and allowed the new prayer house to be opened. This theory, however, has lost its popularity in June 2013. In Tsintskaro, unlike Nigvziani, this theory is less prevalent and here a nationalist discourse is used. In Samtitskaro, this theory is not at all discussed, whilst according to the member of Dedoplistskaro Municipality, the local Khoja felt free to start planning the prayer house he had long wanted to open.

Factual controversy of this theory lacks validity, whilst it had widely been used by the government and the dominant religious group. Under this model, the previous ruling party was allowed to hide the underlying reasons of the conflict and avoid legal and political responsibilities.

The controversy that exists around the given theory raises questions on its authenticity. The frequent reference by the Orthodox Church⁶⁹ and the government representatives to the given theory can only be explained with their pragmatic approaches – this model of explanations is allowing them to deny the existence of real systemic problems and to avoid the political and legal responsibilities.

The talks on there being links between the religious conflicts and the power transition can be explained with the vicinity of the election period - the society attached political and social meaning to it. The power transition occurred when the political order was being systemically revised and massive civic upheaval was taking place⁷⁰. The transition went beyond only changing the political elites and caused the political-ideological paradigm shift. In this respect, several theories are relevant and have their empirical proofs.

⁶⁹ Note: on October 11, 2013 the Holy Synod of Georgian Orthodox Church issued a statement on its assessments of the religious conflicts – where it stated that the conflicts were artificially inflated and were aimed on setting of the two traditional religions and its representatives against each other. The Holy Synod addressed the government to investigate cases and take adequate measures. You can access the Synode statement here: <http://www.netgazeti.ge/GE/105/News/24410/>

⁷⁰ The Orthodox Ethics and the Spirit of Unfreedom, Giorgi Maisuradze, pp 102-128., 2013

Beating the old government in elections had particular reflections on the local level. The dissatisfaction of the society with the previous government was later projected on the United National Movement as on the major enemy. When the ruling party lost the elections, the public felt triumphant and sought political revenge against the Muslim Community for its supposedly conformist approach to the previous government. Attempts of the dominant religious group to demonstrate its power was underlined by the fact that the public felt alienated and suffered from identity crises. This type of alienation can be a result of political systems monopolizing public space, a lack of communication between public and political elite and dehumanization of system under order and modernism.

To explain the conflicts in a more global aspect we can refer to the new attitudes that exist between the Church and the State. For analyzing the given topic we will discuss the situation before and after the 2012 parliamentary elections.

The previous government often demonstrated courtesy towards the Church, and thus violating the secularism principles. This has been evidenced through many legal and financial privileges the Church enjoys. Other than these entitlements, it had also received funding from the reserve fund and other resources from the local self-government bodies.⁷¹

When claiming the legitimacy of the state, the latter has used the historic and religious forms of legitimization.⁷² Through its use, the State violated the principles of secularism that require the deconstruction of a theology centered ideology and the establishment self-legitimizing mechanisms by the political state. During the previous government, it was impossible to review the religious politics that would have addressed these legislative and factual inequalities between the dominant Church and the religious minorities.⁷³ The State had weak policies regarding the protection of religious freedom and proved to be ineffective in addressing crimes motivated by religious hatred and indoctrination practices at school.⁷⁴

After the Rose Revolution the State's modern and liberal discourses, aggressive repression as well as an open confrontation with religious leaders have laid out the foundation for religious conflicts. Throughout this period, there have been a number of open confrontations with the Church, including the dismantling of the church on Peria Mountain in 2007⁷⁵. There were also the arrests of the Orthodox parents union after the incident at the TV channel Kavkasia (2010)⁷⁶ and allowing religious organizations to register as legal entities of public law (2011). The configuration of the powers between the State and the Church can be explained through self-limitation and balanced politics.⁷⁷

After the 2012 elections, the state lost its balanced approach and the Church openly manifested its powers. The new government could not maintain the power balance which can be explained through several reasons.

⁷¹ Note: Survey conducted by International Transparency- Georgia shows that during 2002-2013, direct funding allocated to the Church by the Ministry of Finance made up GEL 160.672.200. In 2002, at the time of signing the Constitutional Agreement, the Ministry allocated the Apostolic Church GEL 857.600. In the aftermath of the "Rose Revolution", as the state budget grew, so did the governmental funding of the Patriarchate. There were cases when funding increased nearly twofold or threefold. GEL 8.388.200 was spent under presidential and governmental decree for holding various activities between 2006 and 2012. Local municipalities have allocated around GEL 16.000.000 to the Georgian Patriarchate from 2002 up until today according to administrative authorities' information. Municipalities are helping out eparchies either with small monetary subsidies, such as the financing of various events, or with more tangible assets, such as the transferral of movable or immovable property. An overview of public financing provided to the Georgian Patriarchate. <http://transparency.ge/en/blog/overview-public-financing-provided-georgian-patriarchate>.

⁷² Secularization and the fate of Secularism in Georgia. Zaal Andronikashvili and Giorgi Maisuradze, Edition: Secularism: Concept and contexts, 2011 Tbilisi.

⁷³ See the Report of the Public Defender on the protection of human rights and freedoms in Georgia. 2010. pp.311.317. accessible <http://ombudsman.ge/files/downloads/ge/ktifezljkytwmwbpggc.pdf>

⁷⁴ Ibid. pp. 308-311.

⁷⁵ See: http://www.myvideo.ge/?video_id=2005864

⁷⁶ See, <http://1tv.ge/news-view/14498>

⁷⁷ Towards a dynamic theory of ethno-religious conflict, Jonathan Fox, department of political studies, bar Ilan University, Roman Ganm Israel, Nations and Nationalism 5 (4), 1999.

1. Fearing that the State might make similar mistakes, it refused to use modern language and oppressive measures that naturally weakens the State. 2 During the pre election period, bonding closer ties with the Church, who was a major opponent to the government, was strategically important and after the political party came into power, it was bound by its own past.⁷⁸ One can use a pessimistic argument, arguing that the current loyalty to the Church is a result of the State's ideology. During the pre-election period, the State could not create a new political ideology (this can be explained by a non-homogeneous nature of the political mainstream). The new government therefore built its platform full of confronting politics with the previous government. Moreover, in its fight for power government authorities often used nationalistic, xenophobic, and homophobic statements.⁷⁹ This openly was in conflict with the modern liberal values and made them the ideological allies of the Church. Through this the failure of the new government to protect secular and liberal values can be easily explained.

After the religious conflicts, the events of 17 May and dismantling the minaret in Chela had further aggravated the criticism and had caused crises of secularism.

The analysis of different aspects of secularism determined in the course of the research

Chapter 5 analyzed the topic of secularism regarding the distribution of power between the State and the Church. The proposed chapter discusses secularism in a different context, here it is discussed how important the issues of legitimization and privatization of religion are, and what influence they have on the religious conflicts.

The process of secularization is linked to the period of the formation of contemporary nations. Political systems become self-legitimizing, devoid of religious influences and the Church/God, as a legitimate subject, is being replaced by the people/the nation⁸⁰.

The model of secularism implies in itself the differentiation of social processes, as a result of which religion is losing control over numerous social processes. Religion is privatized and finds its place within an individual's personal space. Religion becomes the person's identity. In a modern, secular society the nature of faith becomes relative. Democratization reaches in the space of religion – the believer is not choosing the religion for its universal truth, but for identifying the self, its subjectivity.⁸¹

This research showed that in Georgia there is a critical problem with the nation as a political entity. In all three regions the cause of the conflict was that the dominant religious group was not willing to accept the identity of a "Muslim Georgian". In their perceptions the national/political identity should coincide with the religious (Orthodox Christian) belonging and forces out the individuals of different identities from public spheres. The idea of a public political sphere where each citizen has a place and grants them equal rights and freedoms is rejected here. The local Christians said Muslims can pray in privacy, in their houses, but can not have their place in public space. In the perceptions of the dominant religious groups the land is sacred and this never allows it to be shared with "others". Sharing creates the fears associated with the conquest, while the fight against it gains a heroic meaning. It is important to mention here that throughout the course of the conflicts in every village the idea of evicting, banishing the Muslims from the village was prevalent.

Despite the fact that both dominant religious groups as well as the Adjarian Muslims are eco-migrants, the Christians are openly insisting on sole ownership of the land and the village. This, in general, creates a problem of identity.

The discourse analysis of the local Christians' interviews vividly shows that their collective consciousness and behavior is fed by historic narratives. Social life is still dominated with ideas such as: Adjarians were forcefully converted to Islam, Turkey is a conqueror, Georgians have been thrown out from Saingilo and Azerbaijan is a

⁷⁸ See Father Jacob preaching <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7NXvLYuqvE>

⁷⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7w6t91sMDfI>

⁸⁰ *Secularization and the Birth of the Nations*, Gigi Tevdzade, "Secularization: Concept and the Contexts", 2011, Tbilisi

⁸¹ *Secularization or Desecularisation*, Giga Zedania, "Secularization: Concept and the Contexts", 2011, Tbilisi

neighboring enemy. Self-identification through these projections of the past gives the acts of the dominant group an irrational and inadequate character. The research demonstrates that the cultivation of the mentioned narratives is being assisted by the Christian clergymen and the indoctrination by teachers at public schools.

The usage of the mentioned historic narratives against the Adjarian Muslims contributes to the stigmatization of Adjarian Muslims – which on its hand, causes their self-victimization. It's noteworthy that the places where the Muslim community is socially and economically well-established, as well as integrated, Muslims deal with the process of stigmatization and indoctrination relatively easily and realize the importance of fighting for their rights (e.g. Nigvziani Village).

The narratives of the past and their traumatic fixations create a most prevalent ideological system which is an upshot of what the Church does and, in numerous cases, what the political authorities do.

Any type of disagreement with this ideology is regarded as an offense and reproduces violence. The theory of religious conflicts explains that when the knowledge/value system the Church offers to people is threatened, the justification of violence is possible⁸². The public policies enacted in the society by the Orthodox Church (the ways the Church is presenting itself to the public) is devoid of ethics, theological meanings and in most cases encourage nationalistic beliefs. Consequently, offences against this ideology automatically implies the beginning of a conflict based on religion. It can be a separate topic of research to learn how quietist or violent the theological doctrine of Orthodox Christianity can be. The discourse analysis of the statements by the clergymen within the conflict context shows that their preaching is dominated by ideas of intolerance towards different religious groups, their discreditation, and the thought of the Georgian Orthodox Church being superior to others.

The research showed that the dominant religious groups find it hard to identify themselves with the liberal and secular order and what is more, they are in conflict with it. It is exactly the crisis of secular nationalism that gives the rise to religious and ethnical identities. Social theories have answers to what the reasons are that society is losing its belief in the secular nationalism. The following are noteworthy for the context discussed: 1. Secular nationalism promises political freedom, economic prosperity and social justice, but the State that carries this ideology is incapable of responding to these challenges. Its failure, as such, causes the system's illegitimacy. 2. For many non-European countries secular nationalism is regarded as a foreign, imposed ideology without any legitimacy or authenticity on the ground. 3. Secular nationalism is identified with cultural colonialism, along with the fear of losing traditions and an identity, which is felt even more dramatically when it occurs together with modernisation (abolition of traditional links, collective values, and atomization of societies)⁸³.

The proposed theoretical models are very well explaining the Georgian reality, as well as the religious conflicts here and the general challenges that the country faces in respect to secularism. The reasons of the crisis of secularism can be found within political systems which failed to consolidate the society under one national narrative. Devaluation of the declared liberal-democratic values occurred when no free political space was offered and social justice ensured.

⁸² Towards a dynamic theory of ethno-religious conflict, Jonathan Fox, department of political studies, bar Ilan University, Roman Ganm Israel, Nations and Nationalism 5 (4), 1999.

⁸³ Towards a dynamic theory of ethno-religious conflict, Jonathan Fox, department of political studies, bar Ilan University, Roman Ganm Israel, Nations and Nationalism 5 (4), 1999.

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