ISLAM IN GEORGIA: POLICY AND INTEGRATION

RESEARCH REPORT

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INTRODUCTION
Since the beginning of the 21st century, certain events in international politics have revived discussions on issues related to Islam. It is evident that spreading of Islam has acquired totally different contents from that of previous centuries and taken a direction following modernized tactical vectors. States’ reactions to Islamic politics follow unprecedented terrorist attacks affecting some of the world’s largest nation-states “in the name of Islam”, which pushes states to revise their long-established attitude towards this particular religion and develop strategies to respond to new realities.

Georgia, due to its unique geo-political situation, remains a place where mature reflection of the modern inter-religious context is of vital importance, especially because the Muslim community is the country’s largest religious minority, with both Sunni and Shia followers.

Georgian communities have interacted with Islam as early as the 7th century, when Arab invaders subjugated the country and established their rule in the name of Islam and by means of its regulations. Equipped with the ideology of Islam, the Arabs, who before adopting Islam had never developed modern military tactics or organized themselves into a coherent society, managed to conquer the most powerful countries of those times and successfully reached the center of Europe. The foundations of Islam, which can be universally applied rather than privileging a specific ethnicity, greatly contributed to the Arabs’ adoption of conquered lands.

Importantly, unlike the strict rules governing treatment of polytheists (mushrikun) and unbelievers (kafir) the Quran allows some ‘exceptions’ for followers of Christianity and Judaism. More specifically, there is no explicit and open appeal for killings of Christians and Jews or religious duress against them.

In short, the “safe-conduct” commissioned by Habib Ibn Maslama for the inhabitants of Georgia is based on the immunity for Christians and Jews— with some conditions. The safe-conduct promised inviolability of faith to indigenous Georgian communities at the expense of the payment of two taxes – kharaj and jizya levied on Georgians. From the adoption of the “safe-conduct” to the 18th century, Georgia’s history of interaction with Islam, or rather with the various implications of political Islam, has been characterized by dramatic narratives of either direct conflict or a search for peaceful co-existence.

The situation drastically changed due to the Russian Empire entering the Caucasus. At that time, Muslim states had no capacity to stand against a powerful rival and Georgian frontiers (as a part of Tsarist Russia or the Soviet Union) had long remained out of their reach. Meanwhile, policies and communication with Muslim settlements and communities in Georgian territory in various historical settings were exclusively determined by the Russian political elite. It is indicative that the Caucasian Muslim Office of
Russia was set up in Tbilisi, rather than in any Muslim-majority cities.

The formation of the Regulations on the Trans-Caucasus Mohammadi Clergies, which were adopted by the Tsar in 1872, is yet another important historical event. The major goal of the Regulations was to establish the rights and responsibilities of the Muslim clergies in great detail in relation to the government. It was vital for Tsarism to put the Muslim clergy in a position wherein they would act in the spirit of the Government, while at the same time the government would be able to observe, conduct surveillance, double-check and lead their activities.

Importantly, in the same period the Tsarist government established a school for Sunni and Shia clergies (mullah) in Tbilisi. For obvious reasons, the government was more interested in training loyal apprentices for the empire rather than investing in substantive religious education.

Interesting processes were observed in the beginning of XX century. In 1907 a political party for Tbilisi’s Muslims called ‘Modafee’ (self-defense, self-protection) was established in Tbilisi to promote religious upbringing and education among Muslims who resided in Tbilisi Governorate. As a result, Georgian public figures started taking solid efforts to support the integration of Muslim Georgians to the Georgian environment. An important step put forward by Georgia’s intelligentsia was an initiative to translate the Holy Quran into the Georgian language for Georgia’s Muslim community. The first Georgian translation of the Quran was eventually published in 1906.

Interestingly, official statistics suggest that before Georgia became a part of the Soviet Union, hundreds of mullahs served in a wide network of mosques and madrasas covering the uyezds\(^1\) of Adjara, Akhaltsikhe and Borchalo. In Adjara, about 158 mosques were frequented by local Muslims, while the number of mullahs totaled 317. Akhaltsikhe Uyezd housed 86 mosques with 164 mullahs. More than 107 mullahs served in the 59 mosques of Borchalo Uyezd.

During the Soviet period, issues related to religions, including Islam, were either silenced or wrongly interpreted for political reasons. That is why historic and theological aspects of Islam during the Soviet period need to be researched in-depth.

The period following the collapse of the Soviet Union saw not only the rise of traditional religions, but also the introduction and establishment of religious denominations which were not typical for Georgia and the Caucasus. As a result, a vast majority of the population rapidly embraced religion, with Georgia’s Muslim community being no exception. The growth of religiosity among Muslims has led to a situation wherein there are diverse and colorful varieties of Islam in a country which has always been predominantly Christian (Orthodox).

\(^1\) Administrative-territorial unit in Russian Empire
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES & METHODOLOGY
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The researches, conducted in Georgia have demonstrated that despite a historic experience of co-existence between diverse religious groups, the country experiences longstanding problems related to the lack of integration of various religious denominations into mainstream communities. As mentioned earlier, due to ongoing processes and developments unfolding in the modern world, a greater attention has been drawn to the situation pertaining to Muslim minority communities worldwide, and Georgia is no exception. The Muslim community, as the largest religious minority group in Georgia, has been subjected to much scrutiny and analysis. State institutes, the non-governmental sector and Georgia’s strategic partners all work actively to enhance the awareness of the Georgian public on these matters.

The present research aims at examining issues related to the integration of Muslim communities, raising awareness of the wider public on these issues, and developing recommendations for respective stakeholders.

Research on issues of Muslim integration in Georgia has become the focus of many organizations. Some important research recently published highlights challenges facing local Muslim communities. Therefore, the present research is specifically aimed towards a) taking a closer look at issues related to not only the religious, but also the civic aspects of integration; b) checking the reliability of previous findings and providing updates/new developments; c) analyzing policies and projects developed and implemented by various institutions for the last few years. By using this methodology, we hope to identify those factors which prevent the target group from achieving full integration.

METHODOLOGY

The research was divided into three parts. At the initial stage, the research team implemented fieldwork and collected primary information by using qualitative research methods (desk analysis and in-depth interviews). The qualitative information was obtained as a result of consultations with different institutions, as well secondary data analysis and analyzing open sources.

At the stage of the initial research the team of researchers reviewed the existing literature and conducted a series of in-depth interviews. The aim of the researchers at this stage was to collect already available information around these issues and analyze activities undertaken within two sectors – government agencies and local non-government organizations, while roles played by important institutions such as the media and the Georgian Orthodox Church were analyzed separately.

The desk research includes the review of scholarly publications, state policy papers, documents of various state agencies, as well as analysis of research commissioned and administered by NGOs and IOs on the issue of integration of Muslim communities.

In-depth interviews were conducted with government officials and technocrats, representatives of non-government and international organizations, think-tanks, independent experts, and other relevant stakeholders.

The second stage of the research comprised fieldwork undertaken in three regions with predominantly Muslim communities: Kvemo Kartli (town of Marneuli), Pankisi gorge and Adjara (City of Batumi, town of Kobuleti, village of Akhalsheni, village of Shuakhevi, village of Keda); as well as in Zemo Ponichala settlement (within the administrative bor-
ders of Tbilisi). Interviews were conducted with representatives of local self-government, NGOs and IOs, experts, civil society members and representatives of target Muslim communities as part of the fieldwork. These meetings were intended to find additional information, and understand problems at a local level.

At the last stage of the research, the team of researchers presented preliminary findings and finalized recommendations at a conference attended by leading field experts, representatives of state agencies, and civil society and Muslim community members from the target regions. The present document reflects on information obtained as a result of the discussion.

In total, 60 in-depth interviews, including 17 with representatives of state agencies, 19 within local and international NGOs, and 34 with members of Muslim communities, initiative groups, and experts, were conducted within the frame of the research.
GEORGIA’S MUSLIM COMMUNITY
According to the population census of November 2014 conducted in Georgia, there are 398,000 Muslims residing in Georgia, constituting 10.7 percent of the country’s total population. These data suggest that the Muslim community is the second largest religious community in the country.

Data provided by the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia suggest that by early 2016, there were 312 mosques functioning in Georgia with more than 400 clergymen appointed by the Administration providing service. There are also more than 30 junior spiritual schools welcoming all juveniles and other interested individuals to study the basics of Islam, texts of the Quran and the Arabic language.

Muslim communities live in compact settlements in the Pankisi Gorge, Akhmeta municipality, Kvemo Kartli region and Adjara Autonomous Republic. In addition, there are small Muslim enclaves in Kvareli, Telavi, and Sagarejo municipalities of Kakheti region (ethnic Avars and Azeri), as well as in Tsalka municipality, Samtskhe-Javakheti, and Guria regions (eco-migrants displaced from Adjara and small groups of repatriated Meskhs). A large population of Muslims also reside in Tbilisi, with the total number exceeding 16,000.

Regions populated by Muslim communities face specific challenges due to their multi-ethnic nature and certain particularities of socio-economic development. Controversies within Muslim communities are unique for each of these regions, which is also an important factor to consider in this regard.

It should be noted that high rates of unemployment and low levels of social engagement are problems throughout the country, however, in the ethnic and religious minority regions, these problems directly affect the quality of civic integration.

**PANKISI GORGE**

Kists of Nakh background arrived in the Pankisi Gorge in the 1840s. As a result of their tight social and economic contacts with local Georgian communities, they were quick to adapt to the local environment. Traditionally, Kists are followers of the Shafi’i madhhab (school) of Sunni Islam.

Estrangement of the Kist community from the rest of Georgia began after Georgia regained its independence. Scholars believe there had been several drivers contributing to this estrangement. The difficult political, economic, and social environment dominating the country in the 1990s, coupled with deeply rooted corruption within central and local authorities, engagement of the gorge’s communities in drug and arms smuggling, and military confrontations in Chechnya are considered the most significant of these drivers. According to various sources, as a result of the First and Second Chechen Wars, thousands of Chechen refugees settled in the Pankisi Gorge, which significantly changed the local social context.

Considering the existing security situation in the North Caucasus, the Georgian government must deal with the challenge of protecting the gorge from being affected by ongoing processes in the neighboring regions, and maintaining stability at a local level. The Russian Federation has maintained an especially harsh stance towards the Pankisi Gorge, as they view regional processes in the frame of anti-terrorism operations. Consequently, the Pankisi Gorge constantly makes international media headlines and draws attention as a subject of international press outlets. In the beginning of the 2000s, the

1 Results of 2014 general population census. Available in Georgian at: http://census.ge/ge/results/census
Georgian government started to implement wide-scale measures as a response to the aforementioned challenges, and successfully managed to eliminate a series of problems at that time.

It should also be noted that since the Second Chechen War (1999-2000), the Sala-fi movement of Sunni Islam has been gradually spreading in the Pankisi Gorge. The movement was promoted mainly from the Chechen Republic, and partially from the Arab states. The lack of opportunities for professional development and social mobility, a low quality of education in their own state, as well as isolation and estrangement from the rest of the Georgian regions have led local youth to resort to Salafi Islam as a way of self-realization and expression.

Based on the data from the 2014 population census in Georgia, there are 5 700 ethnic Kists residing throughout the country, the majority of whom are Muslims. According to information provided by local municipalities, 230 Chechen individuals who migrated to Georgia at the end of the 1990s also live in the Pankisi Gorge. These persons hold refugee status and are well-integrated into the local Kist population.

Despite the difficult socio-economic context, Pankisi’s young people are very keen on education. The state language (Georgian) is a language of instruction in every school in the gorge, and the number of those willing to pursue higher education remains high. Currently, up to 80 students from Pankisi pursue higher education in the country’s various educational institutions. In 2015, the Ministry of Education and Science introduced an additional annual quota for 14 students from Pankisi’s Kist villages as an incentive for local youth.

At the same time, the lack of job placement opportunities for newly graduated local youth near their places of residence is a serious challenge. It should be noted that there has been a strong depopulation trend in the Pankisi Gorge, which has been observed for the last 10-15 years. Kists, mostly youth, choose to seek jobs in the Russian Federation (the Chechen Republic) and Turkey. The number of labor migrants to the EU countries is relatively low. According to information provided by interviewees, up to 1 200 Pankisi residents currently reside in the Chechen Republic, and most of these people have already obtained Russian citizenship. They are also integrated in their host communities; however, their family and friendship ties with Georgia are still preserved.

According to data collected from interviews, around 60-70 percent of the youth (age 35 and younger) are adherents of Salafi Islam, while the rest of the population, including a majority of elderly members of the community practice “traditional” Islam. Currently, there are 5 mosques and madrasas frequented by followers of traditional Islam, while followers of Salafi Islam

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1 Results of 2014 general population census. Available in Georgian at: http://census.ge/ge/results/census
attend 7 mosques and madrasas. Traditional mosques are managed by the Administration of Muslims of all Georgia however, only a mosque in the village of Duisi has been officially registered. The Administration is responsible for the operation of mosques and prayer houses, and pays monthly salaries to the clergy. It should be mentioned that the Salafi congregations do not recognize the authority of the Administration, and use their own statute to regulate sacred services.

Most respondents said that poor infrastructure, the failure of authorities to keep pre-election promises, inactive local authorities, and a local majoritarian MP are to blame for impeding the integration of Pankisi communities. Oftentimes, local problems are directly ignored and the gorge’s Muslim communities often feel disappointed, as they believe no political force that has ever ascended to power in the country has the political will to change their approaches to the Pankisi Gorge.

Activities undertaken by the central authorities and their proxy institutions in the Pankisi Gorge lack consistency and deliberation with the government, and fail to produce a holistic and well thought-out vision in relation to the gorge; there are discrepancies between the declared state policy and actions undertaken by state agencies acting at the local level. For instance, respondents from the Pankisi Gorge state that representatives of the regional police and special services often demonstrate degrading attitudes towards local communities, which may be explained by deeply rooted stereotypes towards Kists and lack of professionalism.

The Kist community is very unhappy with the fact that they are often exposed to discriminatory treatment by special services while crossing the state border; they are often stopped without reasonable grounds, interrogated, humiliated and insulted. The findings of the research suggest that the practice has acquired a systemic nature after the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) became active in the Middle East. Such a response from security services may be explained by the fact that there have been records of Georgian citizens of Kist ethnic background who have participated in military actions in the territories of Syria and Iraq. Based on various unverified sources, up to 50 fighters from Pankisi are involved in these conflicts; however, it should be noted that many of them did not directly travel to Syria and Iraq from Georgia, but instead from Turkey and the European countries where they had been living as refugees and economic migrants.

The situation is further complicated

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1 The organization was founded in 2011 and unites both Shia and Sunni followers. It aims at protecting interests of the Muslim community and its historic heritage.
by political statements that various international actors make towards the Pankisi Gorge from time to time. In this regard, assessments voiced by officials from the Russian Federation stand out as some of the most alarming. As a result of inconsistent policies of the Georgian government towards the Pankisi gorge, stereotypes entrenched in the Georgian public and vitriolic statements made at an international level contribute to creating an unhealthy environment around the Pankisi Gorge, which, in turn, creates barriers for the local communities to fully engage in integration processes.

Religious confrontation within the community has been identified as yet another barrier to effective integration efforts. As mentioned earlier, the Salafi movement within Sunni Islam started to spread in the gorge by the end of the 1990s and as of today, its followers include most of the local youth. A rapid spread of Salafism in the region was determined by not only external systemic factors, but also by the weakness of traditional Islam in the gorge. In other words, the level of religious education and competence of the “traditional” Muslim clergy is quite low, and very often individuals without any formal religious education are appointed as imams at the mosques. Representatives of traditional Islam cannot compete with Salafi leaders, who receive excellent theological education in Arab countries. So far, the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia seems to be unable to effectively solve this problem partially due to the lack of an adequate religious education base in the country.

In addition, the traditional institution of the Pankisi Council of Elders has also been weakened, partially because of confrontations among its members. During its existence, the Council has acted as an informal legislative and judiciary authority. The Council members would develop a general code of conduct based on Sharia law and traditional Chechen lore. They also acted as mediators between parties in conflict. As a result of strengthening state authorities and Salafi jamia, the Council of Elders has started to lose their credibility and may even cease to function eventually. The research found that representatives of traditional Islam are against empowering Salafi jamia in the gorge, as they believe that this may lead to greater Arabization and eventually erase ancient Kist-Chechen traditions and values. In turn, Salafi followers argue that traditional Islam is based on North Caucasus rites and lore, and has nothing in common with ‘pure’ and ‘true’ Islam, based solely on the laws which are given in the Quran.

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based solely on the laws which are given in the Quran. In addition, they argue that persons without a command of Arabic cannot possibly preach Islam, a practice which is common amongst followers of traditional Islam.

The confrontation is further fueled by the fact that representatives of both denomination address authorities for help, and often the responses of authorities are very different from one another. For instance, under Mikheil Saakashvili’s rule, the government tried to keep the situation in the gorge under control by cooperating with the supporters of the Salafi movement, which contributed to further weakening traditional Islam. However, current authorities have chosen to work more with followers of traditional Islam, and in doing so they are in effect ignoring the other denomination in the gorge. For instance, during a visit of the Georgian Minister of Defense Tina Khidasheli in the Pankisi gorge in January 2016, leaders of Salafi jamia were not able to voice their concerns to the Minister, as they were reportedly not allowed to attend the meeting by law enforcement. Therefore, the Minister met only with representatives of the traditional Islam in the gorge.

Stringent policies in relation to the Salafi movement are often shaped by a misperception which suggests that Salafism and Wahhabism are the same; this equivalency is far-fetched from both a political and theological point of view. Such a stereotypical attitude heavily influences the way that the Georgian public, authorities, and state institutions approach religious denominations, which in turn prevents the government from developing and elaborating well thought-out policies in regards to the community in question. However, it should also be noted that there has not been even a single case of Salafi followers being persecuted by authorities in Georgia. Nor have they ever been exposed to repressive measures, restrictions on their freedom of faith, or prevented from constructing and refurbishing mosques and madrasas. The members of the jamia are the ones who regulate their structural-organizational activities.

The position of the Salafi jamia to distance themselves from the Islamic State deserves particular interest. Representatives of Salafi jamia state that they have been taking efforts to prevent the outflow of local youth to territories under the control of the Islamic State. It was also explicitly stated that fighting for the Islamic State was a choice made a small group of local community members or individuals, and that this decision has nothing to do with the declared opinion of local Salafi leaders. Salafism in Georgia will never violently confront the Georgian government. Nor will it distance itself from the Georgian government. The Salafi leaders argue that representatives of Salafi jamia are active and would accept employment in the state structures and agencies if they have a respective educational background, or run small and medium-sized businesses.
KVEMO KARTLI REGION

Kvemo Kartli region is traditionally home to compact settlements of Muslim communities, a great majority of which are populated by ethnic Azeris. In addition to Kvemo Kartli, ethnic Azeris also reside in Sagarejo, Lagodekhi and Telavi municipalities of Kakheti region. According to the latest population census, the number of ethnic Azeris residing in Georgia is 233,000, with 182,300 residing in Kvemo Kartli region.\(^1\) It should be noted that the ancestors of the modern day Azeris migrated to Kvemo Kartli in the beginning of the 17\(^{th}\) century, and have lived in the Georgian state for four hundred years.

Based on statistics provided by the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia, 93 percent of ethnic Azeri residing in Georgia follow Shia Islam, while 7 percent follow Sunni Islam. However, this difference is rarely felt in everyday life (there are kinships, mixed marriages, tight social and economic contacts) and both groups represent one integrated society.

Kvemo Kartli region shares the same social and economic problems with the rest of the country. Infrastructure connecting villages is underdeveloped, and rural communities are often cut off from cultural and educational institutions. Poor knowledge of the state language further complicates these problems, as it creates an effective barrier to political and cultural integration of the local Muslim communities. Villages located far away from Tbilisi and other regional centers tend to experience these problems most of all, as their traditional secluded way of life and the lack of social and economic contacts with communities residing in other regions seriously hampers the process of integration.

The process of integration of Georgia’s Azeri communities is directed to overcome the language barrier by increasing the quality of civic engagement and including of Azeri communities within the Georgian information space.

Over the past few years, the introduction of the so called “1+4 system”\(^2\) in higher education has played a significant role for the integration of Azeri communities into mainstream Georgian society. The system, designed for minority students, enables Azeri (and Armenian) school alumni to take an intensive one year Georgian language course and then pursue higher education and major in the specialization of their choice with relative ease. However, many students argue that learning a language within a year is still a challenging task. Respective agencies should perhaps revise the concept of the program, which has been implemented since 2010.

Based on information provided by local education resource centers and school directors, the number of students leaving Georgia to pursue education in the higher education institutions of Azerbaijan has steadily decreased. Likewise, branches of Azeri higher education institutions operating in Kvemo Kartli region are slowly becoming obsolete.

There has been a tendency of youth graduating from Tbilisi-based higher education institutions

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\(^1\) Results of 2014 general population census. Available in Georgian at: http://census.ge/ge/results/census

\(^2\) The program aims to support young citizens of Georgia from the Azeri and Armenian communities in improving their Georgian language skills and enrolling in local universities.
There has been a tendency of youth graduating from Tbilisi-based higher education institutions who are willing to go back to their regions and seek employment locally in local government bodies, educational institutions or local non-governmental organizations.

As of today, observed trend suggest that the number of ethnic Azeri citizens who are willing to send their children to Georgian schools is on the rise. According to data obtained from the Marneuli education resource center, ethnic Azeris account for 70 percent of students receiving general education in Georgian language schools, and the number grows from year to year. These trends suggest that there is a need to open Georgian language sectors in Azeri schools. However, what seems problematic in this regard is that children with Azeri background enter the Georgian education system without any prior knowledge of the Georgian language, which means that greater time and resources are spent on teaching Georgian rather than on comprehending respective curriculums. This decreases the quality of education, including for Georgian language students, and makes the learning process less efficient.

The aforementioned points highlight the need to further improve the education system in Kvemo Kartli region. Assignment of teachers with knowledge of Georgian to the region’s rural schools and pre-schools remains a challenge. Respondents also argue that the methodology of teaching the Georgian language in schools where Azeri is the language of instruction is in dire need of improvement. It should also be noted that Azeri schools also suffer from a lack of young professionals, as there is no base to train Azeri language teachers in Georgia; therefore, there are no opportunities to renew the school teacher’s cadre in the region’s schools. In general, the level of education in Kvemo Kartli region needs to be improved.

Importantly, proponents of Georgian language education are individuals with ethnic Azeri backgrounds who have already been employed in governance bodies, and therefore are best positioned to see the advantage of knowing the state language for career advancement and self-realization. Hence, it is of critical importance that more young people are recruited into state agencies to speed up the process of their civic integration.

It should be noted that the quality of knowledge of the Georgian language is extremely poor among the older generation in Azeri communities, which may be explained by the fact that Russian was the language of communication between representatives among ethnicities during the Soviet times and therefore, there was not any need to know Georgian.

A Georgian language house operates successfully in the region. The house provides opportunities for studying Georgian to any individual of any age and occupation. The Zu-
rab Zhvania School Regional Center runs two Georgian language programs without age restrictions. One of them has been designed specifically for public servants, while the other has been developed for rural communities of Kvemo Kartli and provides opportunities for studying Georgian by bringing Georgian language teachers to local communities. The number of beneficiaries of the latter school amounts to 120, however, it is evident that no drastic improvement is expected in terms of teaching Georgian to senior citizens of Azeri background.

Therefore, stronger efforts are being made on enhancing the level of Georgian language knowledge among the youth. Data collected during the research from Marneuli municipality more than 40 000 GEL was spent on organizing excursions for local school students from Muslim communities to various regions of Georgia in 2015, and on including these children in various cultural-educational projects in order to establish contacts with their peers from various regions of the country. These types of activities are deemed to be important by local authorities, as local youth in rural communities have limited opportunities to be continuously exposed to Georgian language and communication.

Yet another impediment to the integration of ethnic Azeri communities in Georgia is the lack of mixed marriages between ethnic Azeri and Georgians because of general religious restrictions. In addition, Islam and the traditional rites of ethnic Azeris, especially in rural areas, impose certain restrictions over women’s social activism which further hampers the integration process. A widespread tradition of early marriages among ethnic Azeri underage girls, often forced by their parents, also poses challenges to integration efforts. Those who are married are not often allowed by their families to continue their work and therefore, a level of self-actualization among local women remains low.

It is worth noting that Kvemo Kartli’s Azeri Muslim communities are very well integrated with their Georgian neighbors who reside in the same region, thanks to constant and tight social and economic contacts. Oftentimes, local Christian and Muslim communities celebrate the religious festivities of both communities together. A positive role played by local municipalities is worth mentioning as often local authorities are the ones who organize and facilitate such celebrations. However, social tensions and estrangement is apparent in relations with Georgians residing in Tbilisi and other regions of the country. This challenge requires an immediate and coordinated response from authorities and civil society alike.

It should also be underlined that the Muslim communities of Kvemo Kartli region are characterized by a low level of political activism and a strong loyalty to incumbent authorities. On the other hand, these same communities enjoy a high economic potential and the economic development of Kvemo Kartli region should be high on the state agenda for greater integration of Georgia’s Muslim communities.

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At the interview phase, the majority of interviewers chose to focus more on socio-eco-
onomic issues rather than of religion, which created an impression that religious issues are not as important for the wider community. However, our observations and findings from other research conducted by Caucasian House in 2014 provide strong grounds to assume that religion plays an important role in lives of local youth and represents a growing factor in the region.\(^1\) For instance, there are Shia religious schools in Mameuli where they teach Quran, Sharia, history of religion, and other topics related to Islam and Islamic law. According to information provided by a director of one of the religious schools, \textit{Ahli Beit}, 200 students from Mameuli attended courses provided by the school in 2014, while the total number of students from Kvemo Kartli region amounts to 600. The director also stated that religious studies are particularly popular among the students.

Such a contradiction between the findings may be explained by the fact that unlike residents of the Pankisi Gorge, the Azeri community is more closed and consolidated to outsiders, which makes it difficult to obtain and analyze impartial information. In addition, researchers failed to double-check information spread by local media regarding local youth from Kvemo Kartli who have allegedly joined Islamic State terrorist organizations in Syria.\(^2\) However, experts working on these issues have confirmed that there have been several of these cases in the region.

After Georgia’s reclaiming its independence, religious communities in Iran and Turkey have been constantly trying to exert their influence over Shia and Sunni believers in the Kvemo Kartli region. As for Azerbaijan, its attempts to gain influence over the region’s population focuses more on reinforcing ethno-cultural identity. Religious and cultural activism of these three states is demonstrated by providing support to construction of mosques, funding of Islamic spiritual schools, disseminating religious literature, and providing financial support to various cultural and educational projects. It should be noted that it has not been possible to obtain verified information on external financial support rendered to Georgia’s Muslim communities, as both the Administration of Muslims of all Georgia and individual members of the clergy serving in various parts of Georgia refrain from discussing these issues. The only fact which points to the existence of such support is the volume of religious literature that is mostly printed in Turkey and delivered to mosques and congregants through the Administration. Work of companies such as Socar Energy Georgia should be mentioned separately. Unfortunately, it was not possible to meet its representatives in Georgia.\(^3\)

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\(^1\) Dvali, A., Badasyan, E. \textit{Problems and Foreign Policy Preferences of Kvemo Kartli and Samtske-Javakheti Communities}. Centre for Cultural Relations - Caucasian House. 2014. P. 9


\(^3\) Find more about Socar company here: http://www.socar.ge/page.php?lang=ge&page=00
THE AUTONOMOUS REPUBLIC OF ADJARA

The Autonomous Republic of Adjara is the country’s region where the Muslim community also belongs to Georgia’s dominant ethnic group – Georgians. A large majority of Adjara’s Muslim communities are Sunni believers. Islam was introduced to this part of Georgia in the 17th century, and is directly connected with the political expansion of the Ottoman Empire. According to the findings of the November 2014 census, 132,852 individuals out of Adjara’s 334,000 residents – 39.6 per cent of the Republic’s population – indicated Islam as their religion.¹

Over the course of recent years, a series of positive rapid economic changes has been observed in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara in comparison to Georgia’s other regions, which accounts for the fact that socio-economic problems have moved down on the priority list. However, these positive changes may also explain why confrontations on religious grounds are more prominent in the region.

The research has revealed that for Muslim communities, issues related to integration have multiple layers. Perceptions at a local level are largely reflected by the level of Muslim communities’ participation in the region’s political life, and on the pattern of their interaction with the mainstream religious denomination. A common stereotype in Adjara suggests that any Georgian must also be an Orthodox Christian. Therefore, local Muslims often must underline their ethnic Georgian roots in order to claim that they are full citizens of the country. Aforementioned stigmas heavily affect the quality of engagement of Muslim communities in the region’s political processes and their perceptions of state authorities. Both the Muslim clergy and local media representatives point out the fact that Muslim communities lack proportional representation in the government structures of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara while higher positions are often held by individuals from Tbilisi.

At the same time, Muslim leaders of the region complain about the growing tendency of human rights violations, discriminatory and inappropriate treatment, and psychological duress of the local Muslim community members as a result of actions taken by the security services (Different entities of Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia).

Cases of departure of Muslim community members from Georgia to Syria and Iraq add fuel to the fire. Information provided by the Administration of Muslims of all Georgia and local media corroborates that the number of Salafi movement followers amounts to 70 individuals in Adjara. However, unlike the Pankisi gorge jamia, the Salafi movement in Adjara has not yet managed to form a unified structure, as their followers reside in five separate municipalities including the city of Batumi. However, there have been signs that a level of radicalization in Adjara is higher than that observed in Pankisi gorge, and quite often some local communities exhibit signs of radicalization. Individuals with low levels of education or who failed to realize themselves from a professional perspective

¹ Results of 2014 general population census. Available in Georgian at: http://census.ge/ge/results/census
dominate a group of local Salafi followers. Therefore, unlike the Salafi jamia of Pankisi gorge, Adjarian Salafists are not in a position to shape public opinion and their influence over the local communities is minimal.

It is difficult to ascertain how many individuals from Adjara have joined active military formations in Syria and Iraq. In addition, many residents of Adjara seek seasonal or permanent employment in Turkey, and it is extremely difficult to understand their real reasons for being in the Turkish territory.

As mentioned above, the issues related to the integration of the Muslim community in Adjara have multiple layers; the aggressive rhetoric demonstrated by the Orthodox church and some of its representatives is one of them. For instance, the pinning of a pig’s head to the door of a religious school in Kobuleti, damage inflicted to private property owned by Muslims, and an unjustified refusal to provide potable water are a few to name, demonstrating a trend of aggressive actions undertaken by the Church and Orthodox communities in the high mountainous regions of Adjara.

More specifically, Christian clergy intentionally spread holy water on houses belonging to Muslims and preach to local Muslim youth, urging them to convert to Christianity. They state that Islam was introduced to Georgia under duress, and that today, Muslim Georgians have opportunity to convert back to their original faith. As a result of pressure from the wider public and the Church becoming stronger, many people have already converted to Christianity, leading to situations where in older generations in families are Muslims, while the youth are Orthodox Christians. Newly converted Christians are often overly intolerant to representatives of their former denomination.

Some representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church say that aggressive proselytism is justified, and that their actions are a response to uncontrolled attempts to promote Islam by Turkish Islamic organizations, which they believe is a part of an aggressive policy adopted by the Turkish state towards the Adjara region.

It is worth noting that statements made by the Church are not completely groundless. Journalists based in the region stress that there is a Turkish Islamic organization called Suleimajilar, which enjoys a wide network of branches and spiritual schools in Turkey. The organization has been particularly active over the course of recent years, by providing financial support to mosques in Adjara, including religious literature, items necessary for services and the salaries of the clergy and schools’ staff.

It should be underlined that this kind of assistance mostly comes from donations by individual citizens of Turkey and therefore, the real motives behind such acts are often blurred. This practice also makes it impossible to track the sources and movement of money changing hands. A funding system for spiritual schools may come from a mixture of sources. Under this system, teachers’ paychecks are fully funded by the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia, while donations cover all other expenses.1

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1 Muslim boarding school for girls in Peria, Moambe, 2016. Georgian Public Broadcaster. Available at: [http://1tv.ge/ge/videos/view/161563.html](http://1tv.ge/ge/videos/view/161563.html)
Disagreements between religious denominations are further exacerbated by ineffective and/or passive policies at all levels of the government, a concern that has been raised by the majority of respondents in Adjara.

The construction of a new mosque in Batumi is often mentioned as an example. The construction of the planned so-called Abdul-Aziz mosque has greatly contributed to the consolidation of both opponents and proponents of the construction. Separate political groups which before would hardly ever express their position, have now became united around the cause. Locals believe that the pre-election period also helped the issue to reemerge, especially with the help of a representative of one of the political parties, who deftly used an almost non-existent problem as a means of achieving his or her political agenda by pandering to the religious sentiments of voters. All in all, developments revolving around the construction of the new mosque have demonstrated inconsistent state policies towards Muslim communities, limited access to information, overlooked stakeholders and failed to consider alternative options for resolving issues.
GOVERNMENT POLICIES
AND STATE AUTHORITIES
Integration is a complex, multivariate and long-term process. It affects a wide range of stakeholders, while the state and its institutions have a lead role in the implementation of the process. Georgian authorities ascending to power after Georgia reclaimed its independence often had conflicting visions of reintegration. The country’s first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, promoted an ideology saturated with radicalism, and heavily relied on the dominant Christian Orthodox denomination.\(^1\) Edward Shevardnadze’s presidency, on the other hand, never played on radicalism. However, the political, economic and social crisis affecting the country in those times suspended the integration process for religious minorities. Saakashvili’s rapid reforms contributed to the resurfacing of Muslim integration issues, and several important projects ensued. Even though these projects are still being implemented and they are generally considered successful, growing discontent with Saakashvili’s governance placed reforms on the back-burner.

Despite these differences, all approaches shared a tendency of strong politicization. The Georgian Orthodox Church, lead by Patriarch Ilya II, represents one of the country’s strongest institutions, which the public trusts far more than any state institution or political figure. Therefore, each and every one of Georgia’s incumbent authorities has been vulnerable enough to recognize the dominance of the Orthodox community, either covertly or openly, and support the status quo. This state of affairs has eventually pushed other religious communities away from mainstream society, while the state had no clear-cut civic equality and integration plan. Nor was there an official policy on religion. Small scale confrontations on religious grounds and critique voiced in research carried out by local and international organizations have made it clear that the issue needs to be addressed.

On 17 August 2015, the former PM Irakli Gharibashvili approved a government strategy and an action plan for civic equality and integration for 2015-2020. The government strategy aims to support the country’s minorities in maintaining their culture and uniqueness, and engaging with the mainstream Georgian society. Engagement includes: 1) full and equal participation in civic and political life; 2) the creation of equal social and economic conditions and opportunities; 3) access to quality education and improved knowledge of the state language; 4) the preservation of ethnic minority cultures, and the creation of a tolerant environment. The action plan for 2015-2020, in turn, provides detailed information on activities to be undertaken within the indicated period of time.

The strategy for the development of the religious policy of Georgia took effect in 2015. The strategy aims at developing Georgia’s state religious policy and creating an official format for cooperation and communication between the state and various religious denominations. The strategy relies on domestic and international legislation for the regulation of religious issues.

The legal domestic framework for the religious issues include:\(^2\)
1) Georgian constitution of 1995;
2) Constitutional agreement of 2002 between the State of Georgia and the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia;
3) Civil Code of Georgia of 1997;

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\(^{1}\) Results of the first general population census of 2002. Volume 1, Table 28, P. 132
\(^{2}\) The Strategy for the State Religious Policy of Georgia, PP. 5-6
4) Tax Code of Georgia of 2010;
5) Law of Georgia on General Education of 2005;
6) Law of Georgia on Higher Education of 2004;
7) Criminal Code of Georgia of 1999;
Local and international experts agree that as of today, the Georgian legal framework fully covers every issue related to religion.

The state is one mechanism with each institution supporting the development of internal processes. The same is true in regard to minority integration. Each of the country’s ministries works to contribute to the integration of Muslim communities within the limits of their competencies. The section below provides information on the work done by these state agencies over the course of the past few years.

THE STATE AGENCY ON RELIGIOUS ISSUES

A State Agency on Religious Issues was established in 2014 in order to develop a policy for religious issues. The goal of the agency is to set the country’s policy towards religion, develop inter-religious platforms, and regulate issues within the realm of religion. The Agency enjoys active working relations with representatives of all religious denominations and provides a venue for experts of religious studies to connect. It also coordinates an inter-religious council, an advisory body which develops non-binding recommendations on a case to case basis.

As of today, the Agency’s major focus has been on improving the knowledge and competence of its staff. Specifically, a series of trainings are being organized for the staff who are responsible for identifying, detecting and analyzing cases of religious intolerance. Particular efforts have been taken to raise awareness of the law enforcement agencies (e.g. the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Defense).

The major goals of the Agency when it was set up back in 2014 were to systematize issues related to religion, develop a state position, come to terms with religious denominations, and raise their awareness of the State’s position. As a result of these actions, the Agency managed to develop an inter-religious platform which turned out to be acceptable for not only minority religious groups but also to the dominant Orthodox clergy. The same year, the Agency held a series of consultations with religious associations, which resulted in a decision to symbolically and partially reimburse 1 100 000 GEL for the damage inflicted during the Soviet totalitarian regime. In 2015, this sum totaled 2 200 000 GEL. A series of recommendations had also been developed for the handover of 44 mosques to the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia. The Administration also became an owner of two buildings in Batumi to utilize as a residence for muftis and a

1 Except for Salafi jamila within Sunni movement with a sizeable group of Pankisi youth being its members.
Muslim divinity school. The same year, the Agency issued a recommendation to reconstruct and enlarge Batumi’s central mosque.\(^1\)\(^2\)

\section*{THE OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC DEFENDER OF GEORGIA}

The Public Defender of Georgia pays a significant amount of attention to issues related to freedom of religion. The Council of Religions operating under the Office was responsible for reviewing cases related to religious issues, before the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality and the State Agency on Religious Issues was established.

As of today, the Council continues its work. Some argue that by creating a similar format as the Agency on Religious Issues, the two organizations’ functions have been duplicated. However, one must consider that the Office of the Public Defender is a standalone institution focusing on human rights, while the Agency is responsible for resolving issues in accordance with the state policy and interests. At the same time, the Council operating at the Public Defender’s Office has a representation problem. A representative of the Georgian Patriarchate argues that members of the Council exhibit an overly critical disposition towards the Orthodox Church, and often made vitriolic statements which devoid the partnership between the two institutions.

The Office of the Public Defender of Georgia actively monitors the human rights situation in the country and often expresses criticism towards activities of some state agencies. For instance, the 2014 parliamentary report of the Public Defender of Georgia states that “faith based violence and inadequate responses of the law enforcement to these cases still remains the problem. In addition, investigations are still ongoing on cases involving anti-Muslim crimes committed in 2012-2013 in Georgia including issues related to the restitution of religious property expropriated by the Soviet authorities, unfair taxation, the discriminatory and religiously insensitive environment in the country’s public schools, limited access to public space, exclusivity, and hate speech, which are yet to be addressed”.\(^3\)

A report published on 10 December, 2015 also confirms that the situation has remained largely unchanged: “the implementation of requirements of the Law on General Education and cases of religious discrimination at schools still remain a challenge. More specifically, claimants point out to actions directed against religious organizations involving school children and inadequate responses demonstrated by the Ministry of Education and Science while investigating such occurrences.”\(^4\)

\begin{itemize}
\item \(^1\) Report of the State Agency on Religious Issues for June-December 2014
\item \(^2\) 2015 report of the State Agency on Religious Issues
\item \(^3\) The Situation in Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia, 2014 P.426
\end{itemize}
The Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia

Most state institutions are actively involved in implementing measures for the integration of ethnic and religious minorities. However, some of them play a particularly important role in these processes, including the Georgian Ministry of Education and Science.

As of today, the Ministry works closely with the non-governmental sector and international organizations on developing a vision, strategy, and action plan in the field of education. The Ministry has been leading on several important projects directed at greater integration of ethnic minorities.

One of the most successful projects implemented by the Ministry is the so-called “1+4” initiative, which aims at providing an opportunity for non-Georgian language youth to receive higher education in the country’s respective institutions. Specifically, a student is allowed to take a general qualification test in their native language and enroll in an institution of their choice. In their first year, beneficiaries study the state language and take a test after finishing the course. Successful students then pursue a standard four-year undergraduate program. The project started in 2010 and is being successfully implemented to this day. Its completion is planned for 2018. Increased level of interest to the project among linguistic minority communities serves as a good indicator for the success of the project. Despite the fact that the project did not seem to be particularly appealing to students within target groups at the onset, as of today, more than 1,000 ethnic Azeri students have expressed willingness to take the offer with 541 allowed to pursue higher education. 522 of these 1,000 plus students chose the “1+4” program, while 94 entrants have obtained the state scholarship which fully covers their tuition fees (a fixed amount of grant for the public higher education institutions).

A team at the Ministry’s Professional Development Center has been actively working to implement a project aimed at incentivizing ethnic minority teachers’ professional education. At present the implementation team is working to find solutions to overcoming a language barrier for the project beneficiaries. New centers are planned to be opened as a part of the project implementation.

Last but not least, the Ministry, in cooperation with the various legal bodies of public law, has been implementing a series of programs aimed at improving the level of the knowledge of the Georgian language.

The Ministry has been actively working to encourage religious tolerance at schools. Trainings were organized for security officers and school teachers. Also, the Ministry has organized home civic education clubs for more than 1,000 schools, the goal of which are to encourage discussions and debates on various sensitive issues. 12 projects have been funded in Pankisi gorge within the framework of the School Initiative Incentivization Sub-program.
The National Center for Teacher Professional Development is a legal body of public law in the Ministry of Education and Science. The goal of the Center is to provide support to improved learning and teaching practices at schools through establishing high standards for teachers’ professional knowledge and practical skills, as well as through enhancing the status of the profession. The Center leads on multiple projects covering the whole country, directed at improving a level of education and encouraging inclusive education at schools.\(^1\)

Two projects titled *Teach for Georgia* and *the Georgian Language for Future Success* stand out in importance. The first one aims at directing qualified staff to Georgia’s high mountainous regions (Shuakhevi, Khulo, Khelvachauri in Adjara, Tsalka, Bolnisi, Dmanisi and Marneuli in Kvemo Kartli), while the second one aims at providing support to the development of the state language among Georgia’s language minority communities (as of 2015, 200 assistant teachers and 88 trainer-teachers were seconded to the 228 non-Georgian language schools of Samtskhe-Javakheti, Kvemo Kartli and Kakheti regions).

### NATIONAL ASSESSMENT AND EXAMINATION CENTER

In 1999, it became evident that the Georgian education system was in dire need of reforms. One of the components of the reform envisaged to set up an entity that would be responsible for establishing methods for impartial and reliable assessments for students. A new system would identify the strengths and weaknesses of teaching and learning processes and help to improve the quality of education. As of today, the scope of the National Assessment and Examination Center’s activities is quite broad, and includes planning, conducting, and administering exams at a local level as well as the implementation of international and other researches.

The Center’s activities are of utmost importance from the perspective of minority integration. It is responsible for an important component of integration of educational systems: the translation of exam and other materials for the non-Georgian speaking segment of the population. The team working at the Center has been translating and improving materials since 2008. In addition, the Center organizes annual Olympiads for Azeri students. The Center also participates in projects which aim to design and implement evaluations for non-Georgian language communities in their respective languages as well as compiling literature (school textbooks) and translating other materials. The Center made an interesting revelation as a result of the multiple engagement process. During the implementation of one of the projects, the Center found that some representatives of the Azeri community did not have a good enough command of their own language to pass a test and therefore, the Center had to adapt the language used in tests to a level of the knowledge of the Azeri language demonstrated by the communities.

In addition, the Center, in a similar fashion as other state institutions, implements various activities which aim at promoting the state language in the Azeri communities. One of the respondents argues that a low level of knowledge of the Georgian language in the Azeri communities is determined by inadequate educational standards at schools.

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\(^1\) The National Center for Teachers Professional Development, an official webpage, projects
Specifically, directors fail to implement measures to make the learning process better and efficient.

The administration of the PISA test is yet another important activity that the Center is responsible for. The test aims at assessing the knowledge and skills of teenage students acquired at schools. The tests are taken by students who are about to complete their general education, and are considered a good means to test their readiness to overcome the challenges of everyday life by applying the knowledge and skills they acquired at schools. Therefore, the PISA test is not a mechanism to test students’ comprehension of school curricula, but rather a tool to measure students’ readiness for full engagement in public life. An interview with a former manager of the project revealed that the PISA test had become a subject of disagreement between the National Assessment and Examination Center and the Ministry of Education and Science. Results of the tests under the Minister Dimitri Shashkin had made it clear that the field had been facing multiple problems. However, because of the existing political agenda, the Ministry demanded that the results be presented only in English. Moreover, they made a decision to completely ignore the findings. The same interview also revealed that the relationship between the Center and the Ministry is largely confrontational.

The confrontation between the two agencies stems from the following grounds: 1) constant changes in the Ministry create a barrier for the Center to establish a sustainable relationship with the Ministry. Frequent changes to the Ministry’s staff often result in changes to visions and approaches; 2) unlike the Center, the Ministry is far more politicized and vulnerable to critique which may question the government’s course of action and success. The Center, whose staff includes professionals and scientists and is considered to be among the most stable and effective institutions, finds it difficult to reconcile with a different environment at the Ministry. To conclude, the Center’s staff are not happy with the relationship between themselves and the Ministry. Moreover, they believe that the Ministry ignores or deliberately chooses to turn a blind eye to the findings of the research conducted by the Center for various political reasons.

**THE MINISTRY OF DEFENSE OF GEORGIA**

Cohabitation of military service and religion is a complex matter. Conducting religious rituals by military personnel in the army is a controversial practice. However, with Orthodox clergy being able to enter military units and perform service in churches on the premises of military units, it eventually became necessary to consider the rights of other denominations.

2016 was marked by the opening of Muslim praying houses in sub-units of the Georgian armed forces. On 6 March, 2016, Tina Khidasheli, former Minister of Defense and Beglar Kamashidze, Mufti of All Georgia paid a visit to the 3rd Infantry Brigade of the Land Infantry’s West Command and opened a prayer room for Muslim servicemen. On 15 March a similar room was opened in the 2nd Artillery Brigade deployed in Khoni.

One of the respondents argues that a low level of knowledge of the Georgian language in the Azeri communities is determined by inadequate educational standards at schools.
The Ministry of Defense has also taken actions in relation to the situation in the Pankisi Gorge. On 10 January, 2016, Tina Khidasheli and her deputies, as well as the State Minister on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration David Bakradze, Deputy Minister of Sports and Youth Affairs, the Deputy Minister of Education and Science Lia Gigauri, and Keti Dumbadze, an advisor to the Minister of Culture and Monuments Protection familiarized themselves with the problems of Pankisi communities. Based on official information, the Ministry of Defense plans to second Georgian and English language teachers to the Pankisi Gorge, namely to the Kakheti Regional Development Foundation. In addition, the Ministry will assign specialists to prepare local youth for the National Defense Academy.

THE GEORGIAN MINISTRY OF SPORTS AND YOUTH AFFAIRS

The Georgian Ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs is another important state institution when it comes to the integration of minorities. The Ministry is one of the leading forces responsible for the participation and involvement of youth in the social life of the country. As stated by a representative of the Department of Youth Affairs at the Ministry, the priorities of the former United National Movement's government in this field was not extensive and limited largely to patriots’ camps. After the change of the government in 2012, the situation has drastically changed. As of today, the Department of Youth Affairs at the Ministry works in several directions.¹ A greater attention is paid to the program on the implementation of ethnic minorities. The team has been actively conducting work in regions with compact minority populations (the Autonomous Republic of Adjara, Kvemo Kartli, Pankisi Gorge). The goal of the program is to ‘improve a level of education and promote concepts of statehood, active citizenship and creativity among youth’ with a strong focus on an educational component. The Department’s staff has identified informal education as an area with a significant gap, and have already started working on the concept of so called “youth centers”. Centers will promote informal education among youth and support the process of integration among the Georgian public. Also, the Department contributed to the development of online courses for youth.

However, the financial side of the integration efforts remains a problem. As relayed by one of the respondents, there is political will among the authorities of the country for greater engagement of the country’s ethnic minorities into the mainstream’s public life. However, because of budget priorities (healthcare and formal education), the Department runs short of financial resources to implement multiple projects.

¹ Priority directions for 2015 of the Youth Policy Department at the Ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs of Georgia
THE OFFICE OF THE STATE MINISTER OF GEORGIA FOR RECONCILIATION AND CIVIC EQUALITY

The primary goal of the office is to promote the civic integration and implementation of the concept of equality. After the establishment of the State Agency for Religious Issues the Office has concentrated more on issues related to civic integration.

THE MINISTRY OF LABOR, HEALTH AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS

According to correspondence received from the Georgian Ministry of Labor, Health and Social Affairs, currently they do not run any specific projects focusing on ethnic minorities, and every Georgian citizen has an access to services stipulated by the Georgian legislation.

Based on statistical data provided by the Ministry there are 63,611, 66,482, and 50,051 registered pension recipients in Kvemo Kartli, Kakheti and the Adjarian Autonomous Republic respectively. The numbers of beneficiaries of the targeted social assistance program are as follows: Kvemo Kartli: 28,132, Kakheti: 7,314 and 29,834 in Adjarian Autonomous Republic.

THE MINISTRY OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE OF GEORGIA

Communication with the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure revealed that there have been important infrastructural projects specifically concerning Muslim communities for the last three years. At the same time, widespread information suggests that in 2016, the Ministry has budgeted for free provision of gas infrastructure to the villages of the Pankisi Gorge.\(^1\)

THE MINISTRY OF CORRECTIONS OF GEORGIA

The research team was only able to establish partial communication with the Ministry of Corrections. After having sent a letter to the Ministry on 24 December, 2015 and several follow-ups and notifications, a Ministry’s letter arrived in the second half of March 2016, according to which the response was still being elaborated. Because of the completion of the project there was no additional feedback. It should be noted that the Agency of Probation was ready to cooperate, however, because of the absence of consent from the Ministry, the two parties could not meet.

Based on available information there are no specific services for ethnic and/or religious minorities. It is worth noting that language related problems create a barrier in service delivery. More specifically, there is a considerable deficit of Russian language speakers, especially in towns where there is a low level of knowledge of the state language among the local communities. Marneuli, as well as other locations compactly inhabited by ethnic Azeri communities are some of these places. Importantly, there is no high demand for these services in the regions.

\(^1\) Open Society – Georgia Foundation: *The government has decided to provide free gas infrastructure to all Pankisi villages.* Available at: [http://ick.ge/articles/25975-i.html](http://ick.ge/articles/25975-i.html)
ANALYSIS OF THE STATE POLICY AND ACTIVITIES OF AGENCIES

When it comes to analysis of the state policy, it should be noted that it has undergone a series of important changes. Mikheil Saakashvili’s government was successful with a series of initial reforms (for instance, “1+4”). However, because of internal and external factors, the government tends to deal with the issues of Muslim communities only in the time-period before elections, to garner votes. Representatives of law enforcement were particularly active in the Pankisi Gorge. However, a change in the ruling powers has eventually resulted in revisiting this policy, while making it more complex. Most ministries spend a sufficient amount of time and resources on issues related to civic integration. The metamorphosis is determined by a failure of previously employed practices, developments unfolding at an international level and pressure exerted by local/international actors.

The state has made considerable efforts to improve the legal framework. However, the effectiveness of these measures has been largely mixed. As already mentioned above, experts of the field argue that the legal framework does not require an additional mechanism that completely covers the sphere of religion. The problem lies not in as much in the legal framework, but rather in issues related to the implementation of laws and political will. Laws existing before the initiatives of 2015 were sufficient to regulate religious issues. However, these laws have not been fully implemented, largely because of the absence of political will. Therefore, there is a question as to what extent additional leverages can be effective in an environment which failed to accommodate the practical implementation of the already existing legal framework.

Political will is the subject of heated debates. Most respondents pointed out that the aforementioned policies exist nominally, but they are vulnerable to various influencing factors. Moreover, there is a question as to what extent the declared policy conforms with values which are shared by the country’s political elites; this question stands out especially when it comes to religious issues. Experts of the field argue that there are radically disposed individuals not only in the executive agencies but also in the legislature who clash with widely declared values, while these individuals are quite influential because of the existing political, social and economic context.

When it comes to specific circumstances inhibiting political will, we imply the stance of the Georgian Orthodox Church, which is the strongest religious institution in the country. The pattern and format of the relationship between the Georgian state and the Church does do not accommodate equality and justice in the country. The problem lies not in the recognition of the historically established role of the Orthodox Church and 2002 constitutional agreement, but in the incorrect perception of what the agreement entails. Historical contribution is not contested, nor does the constitutional agreement support a discriminatory environment in the country. Rather, the problem lies in certain individuals within the country’s political elite, who tend to put their religious views above the establishment of civil society in the country. Also, the presence of radically disposed clergy within the Orthodox Church contributes to the problem.
As a result of these interplaying factors, there is a situation where in popular public institutions are quite active, and individuals supporting an even more strengthened role for the Orthodox Church enjoy strong visibility in the wider public. The support often acquires aggressive forms and contains radical messages. These individuals have strong influences over officials who believe that they represent this denomination.

Moreover, the government is a political entity that needs popular support, and it often is forced to turn a blind eye or inadequately respond to harsh interference of representatives of clergy in secular life. The Church has become an inseparable part of politics and represents one of the biggest sources of the government’s legitimacy. Public perceptions and dispositions are, so far, the biggest contributor to the current context.

The prevailing political climate in the country deserves particular interest. Since the first day of its regained independence, Georgia has been suffering from an unstable political system. What is implied here is not only changes of governments, but also conflicting approaches within governments ensuing as a result of these changes.

Each incumbent Georgian government is characterized by political, social, economic, and cultural visions which almost always conflict with the ones demonstrated by their predecessors. Incumbent governments often harshly criticize the activities and programs undertaken by previous authorities; as a result, there are only a few initiatives which yield long-term benefits.

This pattern makes it complicated to plan initiatives ahead in the field of religion, and creates a barrier to developing long-term plans and programs in general. The country becomes tangled in a series of interminable reforms and often new reform initiatives ensue without completing the previous ones or analyzing their outcomes.

Professionals working in this field argue that this process creates a barrier to implementing far-reaching and long-term policies in the country and discourages the donor community from providing much-needed support. Terminated or suspended projects due to changes of governments are clear examples of the instability prevailing in the country. For instance, a youth policy project was suspended due to the arrival of a new prime minister, and its fate remains unclear, as the new prime minister has different economic and political views. An initiative to introduce a German model of education voiced by the new prime minister, Kvirikashvili, is a good example as the previous education policy still has not been implemented while new approaches have already started to take shape. This is the reason that there is less and less of a connection between the quality of education and implemented reforms.

Permanent changes induced by political instability result in a lack of professionals in the field. Individuals who have worked for the previous government for years must resign, or face the fact that their views and expertise will be shifted elsewhere. Every new minister brings their own personal advisors and close connections, who oftentimes lack experience as well as adequate skills. A low level of education observed in the country also adds to the problem.

Other issues with constant reforms include a lack of information sharing and ef-
fective communication skills. Constant reforms break down feedback mechanisms and makes it difficult to reach out to wider public. This is particularly true in the regions where the lack of knowledge of the state language is traditionally low and/or suffer from under-developed infrastructure.

State structures often use modern technologies (e.g. TV, the Internet, social media, official webpages) to resolve issues. While these modern methods should absolutely be utilized, it is also of utmost importance to take into consideration the environment in which some of Georgia’s communities continue to live.

Official information suggests that only a small part of the country’s population has access to the Internet and only bigger urban entities enjoy a well-developed culture of using this technology.¹ For this same reason, online courses for languages and other subjects is a useful service, but less effective for the integration of minority communities, especially considering the fact that majority of ethnic minority communities have no access to the Internet and therefore, demonstrate a low level of technical knowledge. Consequently, these communities have no information on services which are promoted and advertised mostly through the Internet or other technologies.

Several of the country’s institutions, such as the State Agency on Religious Issues, the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia and the Ministry of Defense of Georgia are worth mentioning separately here.

The Ministry of Defense of Georgia has recently taken considerable steps forward in terms of balancing the Georgian Orthodox Church. By granting the right of exercising religious rituals to the Muslim members of the military, the Ministry contributes to the establishment of principles of equal right among religions. However, a question arises as to what extent this process represents a part of holistic state policy, and whether this is a decision made by only one agency and its head.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia had played the role of gendarmerie over the course of many years. Interviews with experts have revealed that security services are particularly notorious for their harsh and discriminatory treatment of Muslim communities. Many of interviewed experts believe that the situation has not changed significantly. They argue that the situation in the Pankisi Gorge is particularly alarming. Under the Saakashvili government, the Ministry of Interior was perceived as a mechanism of intimidation and the Ministry’s staff continues to exert pressure over the Kist community of Pankisi. A threat recently voiced by a deputy Minister of Internal Affairs towards Pankisi Kists corroborates this perception.² It goes beyond doubt that the state must safeguard the country’s security. However, these measures should not be taken in such a way that violates the human rights of citizens. It is desirable that state actors employ a complex approach, whereby this institution will be one of the units in a chain rather than a leading one. This approach will enable the Ministry to use more time and take stronger efforts to focus on resolving and preventing crimes based on religious hatred. The Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia can be considered as one of the least effective institutions. No respondents that we interviewed had anything positive to say about the work undertaken by the Ministry. Moreover, even respondents from the National Assessment and Examination Center have criticized it.

The key reason behind the criticism is the overly politicized nature of the Ministry, while the frequent changes of ministers and their respective teams is the second largest

¹ IDFI: The Development of Electronic Communication in Georgia: Access to the Internet.
² Kakheti Information Center: Deputy MIA Minister to the Kists: ‘if you do not behave yourselves, I will relocate you from the gorge!’
contributor to discontent. The non-governmental sector appeared to even more critical. Many of its representatives argue that the institute has no clear vision on the development of the education system in the country while the latest arguments have failed to stand any critique.

Issues related to expertise and professionalism of staff employed at the Ministry also raise concerns. It should be noted that the staff at the ministry can be divided into two groups: one group consists of full-time employees who are aware of the situation in the country and the level of the Ministry’s politicization; while the second group comprises contractual employees. Expectedly, there is not much point in talking to individuals from the first group, as they fail to provide well-grounded responses to questions and the rhetoric they use is filled with clichés and devoid of any sense of reality.

On the other hand, contractual employees demonstrate critical attitudes towards the Ministry. They often share a general critique and highlight that the problem lays within the Ministry’s managing team. These individuals do not shy away from terms such as ‘politics’, ‘political will’ etc., while talking to the team of researchers. They refuse to share the opinion that the Ministry suffers from the lack of qualified staff. Rather, they complain about the Ministry’s poorly developed culture, which fails to encourage creativity and new initiatives.

The Ministry has not taken effective steps towards the integration of the Muslim communities. Muslim religious schools are left beyond the scope of the country’s education system and the Ministry has been turning a blind eye to related issues. When it comes to the ‘1+4’ program, the NGO representatives argue that as of today, the Ministry has no plans after the program has phased out. Particular concerns have been raised over the fact that the Georgian language courses for ethnic minority students are provided in a building separate from those attended by Georgian students. Georgian language courses have also been subject to various questions. Currently, many state agencies work to help local communities overcome problems related to the insufficient knowledge of the state language in Kvemo Kartli. At the same time, it is imperative that resources allocated and spent on addressing this issue are proportional to the quality of the knowledge of the state language in minority communities. In addition, most of the courses are designed for the youth and leave older generations outside of the processes. Finally, despite a declared commitment to establishing tolerance, the Ministry has failed to address issues related to unhealthy environment at schools, compromising religious equality and freedom of faith.

The State Agency on Religious Issues deserves to be looked at separately. It should be noted that the Agency took great interest in establishing contact with the researchers. Moreover, unlike meetings with the Ministry of Education, which only bore a symbolic character, during meetings with the Agency, its leading officials personally participated in interviews and demonstrated readiness to answer any question of our interest.

Activities of this agency often become a target of vitriol which may be caused by the factors outlined below: 1) Mistrust. Muslim communities have had negative experiences in dealing with state agencies; 2) Expertise and values of the Agency’s staff; the Agency
has gone through considerable changes since 2014 resulting in famous theology experts leaving their positions. These departures were attributed by some to the expertise of the head of the agency and other individuals working on leading positions. Moreover, during interviews some respondents raised questions over the past of these individuals and to what extent they share the declared values of the Agency; 3) The Agency actively cooperates with the Administration of Muslims founded by Saakashvili’s government and is perceived as a mechanism of centralization and control that is totally unfamiliar to the Muslim communities. Therefore, many representatives of the Muslim community believe the Administration to be an agency specifically set up to control them; 4) The representatives of the Agency stress that the Agency’s staff do not include representatives of diverse religious denominations (beyond the inter-religious format), which, as believed by these religious unions, creates a barrier to full understanding of existing problems; 5) Recommendations prepared by the Agency are often ignored, which leads to discontent with the nature of its recommendations. In addition, timeframe for preparing recommendations are often dragged inducing various speculations.

Issues surrounding the construction of the central mosque in Batumi need to be discussed separately. The Agency developed a recommendation suggesting enlargement of the mosque. The recommendation was further reinforced by signatures that the Agency collected; in doing so it tried to overpower a local initiative group whose members called upon the construction of a new mosque and also collected signatures (totaling 12,000 as of today). Representatives of the initiative group argue that the Agency collected signatures only to deceive Muslim believers. This circumstance has further deteriorated the relationship between some members of Muslim community and the Agency and the Administration.

A political side of this affair needs to be highlighted here. It is evident that before the establishment of the Agency and development of the religious policy, this process involved a wide range of stakeholders. The Agency forced many stakeholders to either transfer their activities into a legal frame or leave the arena. Therefore, those groups who had established and still maintain relations with the original actors, protest against the Agency and try to distance themselves from it. These individuals or associations are particularly active in Adjara region, Kvemo Kartli (city of Marneuli) and the Pankisi Gorge.

The same situation prevails in Marneuli. Many madrasas and mosques have been opened by means of financial support from Azerbaijan and Iran. Before the establishment of the Administration of Muslims of all Georgia and the Agency, a particular representative of an Azerbaijan-based religious union named Ali Aliev was active in Marneuli. However, the creation of a new department considerably shattered his union’s influence, leading to the discontent of the group’s associates. Discontent within Pankisi communities is mostly caused by a clash between the so called “traditional” and Salafi movements within Islam. The number of followers of traditional Islam is on a decline, while the more conservative Salafi movement is getting stronger.

It is evident that before the establishment of the Agency and development of the religious policy, this process involved a wide range of stakeholders. The Agency forced many stakeholders to either transfer their activities into a legal frame or leave the arena.
In their attempt to eliminate Salafism, the Council of Elders calls upon the Agency to take effective measures which cannot be implemented openly because of various political reasons. In turn, the Salafi followers blame the Agency for a deliberate campaign to discredit them. In this matter, it should be said that at the first stage of their work, the Agency did try to separate the Salafi movement from others to place it in a vacuum.

The plan failed, however, as even within the followers of traditional Islam a shared stance could not be found. As of today, the Agency aims at retraining followers of traditional Islam (especially clergy) and improving their knowledge so that they can be competitive with the Salafi movement.
ADMINISTRATION OF MUSLIMS OF ALL GEORGIA

On 5 July, 2011, the Parliament summarily approved changes to the Civil Code according to which religious unions can be registered as legal bodies of public law.¹ The same year saw the establishment of the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia with the goal of protecting the interests and historical heritage of Georgia’s Muslim communities. The Administration, established due to the strong support of the incumbent authorities, has been dealing with problems concerning Muslim communities that have accumulated since Georgia regained its independence. The long list of problems includes the absence of an efficient spiritual education system, lack of qualified staff, and difficulties with emancipating the Georgian Muslim institutions from the ideological-religious influence of other countries.

In addition to its purely confessional activities, the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia is actively engaged in public activities, demonstrated by a series of academic conferences and seminars, as well as efforts to coordinate and communicate with state agencies and other confessions represented in Georgia. The Administration also takes consistent measures to establish contacts with large Islamic centers at an international level, and leads active publishing and charity initiatives.

Before the establishment of the agency, representatives of the Caucasian Office of Muslim Affairs, Adjaran Muftiate, as well as individuals and groups acting on behalf of charity foundations and cultural organizations would implement their activities and projects in the country under the status of NGOs, or in some cases without registration.

The support rendered to the Administration by state authorities has both negative and positive consequences. On one hand, the establishment of such a structure is a positive step forward as it has encouraged Georgia’s Muslims to consolidate under a local umbrella. On the other hand, however, there have been doubts (and not without reason) that because of the State’s huge contribution to its establishment, the Administration cannot develop into a functional entity with enough autonomy to be able to fully protect the interests of the Muslim community.

As of today, there are ambivalent public attitudes towards the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia, and it faces a series of challenges.

Effective communication and relations with extremely diverse Muslim communities represent a challenge. Despite the fact a model of co-existence has developed throughout the centuries amongst the Muslim communities, the confessional peculiarities and diverse ethnic backgrounds of the different communities still remain important factors to consider. As each of these communities has its own specific needs, and the Administration suffers from scarce resources, the Administration often fails to provide a timely and effective response to resolve these needs.

Followers of traditional Islam in the Pankisi Gorge and religious leaders of Adjarian Muslims are particularly unhappy with the activities of the Administration.

Pankisi Gorge and religious leaders of Adjarian Muslims are particularly unhappy with the activities of the Administration. At a presentation of a 2015 annual report of the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia, a representative of the Council of Elders from Pankisi openly criticized their activities in the gorge, evaluating them as ‘insufficient’.

However, the situation in Adjara is quite interesting. More specifically, some religious individuals under the Administration openly confronted it with issues of the construction of the new mosque in Batumi, and support the Muslim unions and associations who refuse to recognize the Administration’s legitimacy and consider it as a part of the state structure.

Yet another challenge faced by the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia is a religious-political confrontation within the country’s Muslim community. The Administration has disagreement on the basis of religious issues with representatives of Pankisi Salafi jamia. As mentioned above, Salafi followers believe that Sunni and Shia movements in Georgia do not follow teachings exactly as they are given in Quran. Most times, Salafis discredit the religious authority of non-Salafis. In turn, the Administration also refrains from engaging in a constructive dialogue with the latter because of various political circumstances.

Also, several religious organizations and individual members of the clergy in Kvemo Kartli and Adjara regions have refused to cooperate with the Administration because of religious-political reasons. More specifically, the refusal was based on their tight religious and political-financial links with leading religious organizations operating in Azerbaijan.

Internal challenges, such as structural flaws and a lack of professional staff, are also challenges that the Administration must overcome. Factors such as the lack of experience with similar organizational relations within the community and inaccessibility to quality Islamic education for decades are believed to have contributed to this problem. Many respondents pointed out the fact that one of the founders of the Administration was an Orthodox Christian, which is unacceptable for some Muslim congregants.

When it comes to discussing structural flaws, issues concerning the cohabitation of followers of Sunni and Shia Islam under the same umbrella organization draw special attention. The research revealed that some influential representatives of Adjara’s Muslim communities believe such unity to be artificial, pointing out that this is unprecedented elsewhere in the world. Moreover, the established practice of Shia and Sunni believers praying together is a result of repressive policies of the Soviet authorities. Despite the fact that this claim is a historical truth, it remains unclear why the authorities cannot or should not support the preservation of an already deeply rooted tradition of sharing the life, especially considering developments unfolding in the region and at the international level.
Meeting the two pressing needs facing the country’s Muslim community can be considered an indicator of success of the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia.

The first challenge is to include Islamic religious education institutions in the country’s education system and ensure access to higher religious education. In this respect the Administration has already appropriated a building located in Batumi to house a new higher education school. In addition, it is planned to open yet another educational institute, either in Batumi or in Rustavi. This plan is supported by the State Agency on Religious Affairs, however some civil society organizations are against it. They argue that setting up separate institutes will further increase the gap between the Muslim community and the rest of the country. They believe that it is better to establish respective departments in already existing institutes which will further increase the engagement of Muslim youth in the general higher education system.

Finally, the construction of the mosque in Batumi is an issue that needs to be resolved. As of today, according to the local jamia, the current, central jame mosque cannot house all those wishing to pray and therefore, they believe it is necessary to build a new mosque. This initiative is contested by the State Agency.

The local congregants have been offered a plan to enlarge the existing mosque. Research has found that the matter is quite complex and includes lots of blame-shifting. Therefore, it is critical that representatives of the Agency and the Administration are able to reach an agreement based on the consensus with the local congregants. Interviews with representatives of the local jamia revealed that ex-prime minister Ivanishvili had already expressed his consent regarding the construction of a new mosque as a promise during the pre-election period. However, as also corroborated by historic experience, the delay in resolving this issue is related to a series of various political factors.

To conclude, in light of the aforementioned problems and challenges, the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia requires political, financial and other support from the State. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that the Administration and its activities will be fully separated from the state in near future. Moreover, considering the scarcity of internal resources, the separation may turn out to be disastrous. Under such circumstances, it is important that the State and the Administration both be ready to ensure the maximum level of autonomy of the organization. Otherwise, the looming danger of losing legitimacy among the community is possible.

As of today, according to the local jamia, the current, central jame mosque cannot house all those wishing to pray and therefore, they believe it is necessary to build a new mosque. This initiative is contested by the State Agency.
A ccording to the last population census, the country’s population totals 3,713,804 with 3,097,573 indicating that they are Orthodox Christians. This means that an absolute majority of Georgia’s population belongs to a single denomination.¹ A survey commissioned by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in 2014 identified the Church as the most trustworthy institute in the country: 94 per cent of respondents claimed they trusted the Orthodox Church. 87 per cent of respondents of NDI’s 2015 survey said they trust the Patriarch of Georgia.² Statistical data corroborate that the Church (an institution) and the Patriarch (an individual) enjoy great influence not only over their parishioners, but also over the wider public, including the country’s leading politicians. Therefore, the Georgian Patriarchy can play an important role in the process of integration of the Muslim community.

It should be noted that the Georgian Patriarchate has demonstrated considerable indifference towards the establishment of the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia.³ Of the Caucasus Office of Muslims Alakhshukur Pashazade, who perceived the establishment of the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia as a threat of losing influence over Georgia’s Muslim community, may account for the indifference. Yet another reason may be the negative attitude of the Georgian Patriarchate towards the enhancement of the legal status of the Administration, and its potential for wider influence, as it fears inter-confessional competition.⁴

According to experts interviewed within the framework of the research, the Patriarch and most of the Church’s representatives have a positive attitude towards the integration of the Muslim community into the broader public. However, it is evident that there is

¹ Distribution of population according to regions and confession. 2014. Results of 2014 general census in Georgia. Available in Georgian at: http://census.ge/ge/results/census
² Georgian Press: According to the survey findings 94 per cent of respondents considers the Church as the most trustworthy institute. 2014. Available at: http://georgianpress.ge/com/news/view/1781?lang=1
⁴ Civil Georgia: Thousands protest the law on legal status of religious minorities. 2011. Available at: http://civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=24311
According to experts interviewed within the framework of the research, the Patriarch and most of the Church’s representatives have a positive attitude towards the integration of the Muslim community into the broader public. However, it is evident that there is a group within the Georgian Orthodox Church who does not necessarily share this attitude.

The Administration of Muslims of All Georgia often explains the rigid attitude shown by some representatives of authorities towards problems facing the country’s Muslim communities by the fact that government officials are forced to take into consideration the stance of the Orthodox Church in relation to other religions.

We can conclude by noting that the Georgian Orthodox Church should take their share of responsibility in processes related to the integration of Muslim communities and play a positive role. As of today, activities and actions of the Georgian Church and the Patriarch are contested. On one hand, in official statements representa-
tives of the Orthodox Church express their support for the inclusion of Muslim communities in a wider Georgian society with the preservation of their religious identity, and on the other hand often take radically contradictory steps including imposing pressure and calling on Muslim youth to convert to Christianity.
NGOs AND THEIR ACTIVITIES FOCUSING THE COUNTRY’S MUSLIM COMMUNITIES
GENERAL OVERVIEW OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

Work undertaken by state agencies is a key indicator for the effectiveness of various integration processes ongoing in the country. At the same time, the engagement of NGOs is of no less importance in this regard. NGOs operating in the country implement a myriad of activities. The geographical scope varies across organizations. Some implement regional projects while others are based in Tbilisi and focus on specific issues of interest throughout the country.

Apart from analyzing programs and interventions by state agencies, the researchers also looked into activities undertaken by NGOs, which may have a direct or indirect influence on the measures for the integration of Muslim communities. For this purpose, the team of researchers held a series of meetings attended by representatives of around 20 NGOs. Meetings were held in Tbilisi, Batumi, Marneuli and Duisi.

NGOs can be grouped based on their scope of their activities and competences. Most regional NGOs have a strong educational component, while the scopes of activities of NGOs based in Tbilisi are much broader and cover not only educational projects, but also activities focusing on human rights.

TBILISI BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Organizations operating in Tbilisi which focus on promoting tolerance and protecting rights of religious associations also take consistent efforts to examine the status of rights of the country’s diverse religious confessions, including those of the Muslim communities in the regions. These organizations often provide legal counseling, court representations and advocates for resolving problems faced by various confessions to authorities.

A number of meetings were held with representatives of Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC) and Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI). Interviewees emphasized recent cases of confrontation between Christian and Muslim communities and violations towards the latter. In this regard, these organizations study social conflicts involving Adjara’s Muslim communities from 2013 to 2015 and provide legal counsel upon request for local communities.

To ascertain the situation concerning the rights of Muslim communities, these organizations administer surveys and research, and develop recommendations for respective state bodies. They try to move discussions around issues and problems into a public space, and by doing so shape public opinion and influence the effectiveness of work undertaken by state structures.

Research titled The Crisis of Secularism and Loyalty towards the Dominant Group, administered by IMC in 2013, analyzes the role played by the state structures in responding to religious conflicts taking place in the country from 2012 to 2013. The research demonstrates that the dominant religious group has been treated with privilege by state institutions. The research paper also points to the ineffectiveness of law enforcement agencies while resolving conflicts based on religious grounds.\(^1\) A similar conclusion was made by TDI (the organization administered study of religious discrimination and con-

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1 Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center: *Crisis of Secularism and Loyalty towards the Dominant Group*. 2013
Human rights organizations also recommend that the criminal justice system be stricter towards crimes committed on grounds of religious intolerance. 

The TDI also frequently criticizes the State Agency on Religious Issues. For instance, the staff often mentions a lack of transparency within a mandate of the Agency which creates additional problems. More specifically, TDI argues that the legal and political meaning of recommendations developed by the Agency is often ambiguous. This problem occurs not when recommendations are addressed to the state, as a founder of the Agency, but rather when they are addressed to local authorities and other organizations.

Human rights organizations have frequently criticized the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia, claiming that it lacks independence from government structures and does not adequately represent the Muslim community. Team members of human rights organizations argue that the identification of problems and development of recommendations, as well as advocacy efforts, have not yielded considerable positive outcomes. Because of this, relations between human rights organizations and state services are quite tense and lack constructiveness.

Yet another important direction within the work of the non-governmental sector is the implementation of education programs supporting the integration of religious minorities. Their major goal is to overcome isolationism.

In general, these interventions aim at strengthening civic engagement and overcoming alienation between various religious and ethnic groups. In addition, the organizations often lobby critical issues to the Ministry of Education and Science, as well as other state agencies.

The introduction of new courses for professional terminology for students enrolled in universities under the “1+4” program is a good example of cooperation between the Ministry of Education and Science and NGOs working on educational issues. The project is implemented by the Center for Civil Integration and Interethnic Relations (CCIIR). Representatives of CCIIR believe that the new program will help non-ethnic Georgian youth to easily overcome the curricula of new professional subjects, which in turn, is likely to improve their competitiveness in relation to youth with ethnic Georgian backgrounds.

In addition, the aforementioned organizations have actively been lobbying the Minis-

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1 Tolerance and Diversity Institute: Study of Religious Discrimination and Constitutional Secularism in Georgia. 2014. p. 78
2 Ibid; p.18
3 Ibid; p.76
try of Education and Science to edit parts of school textbooks which may fuel ethnic and religious confrontations.

The non-governmental sector is actively involved in the process of developing a textbook *Society and Me*, initiated by the Ministry of Education and Science. The textbook aims at providing basic knowledge of civil responsibility, tolerance to third and fourth graders. During the discussion process critique was expressed by the representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church about some parts of the textbook. According to the last statement made by the representative of the Ministry of Education and Science, the introduction of the textbook to the curriculum of schools was postponed for indefinite period of time.¹

Also it is still unclear what other confessions, including the Muslim community, think of the introduction of the textbook in school curriculum. As stated by representatives of the Administration of Muslims of all Georgia, they are not aware of the content of the textbook. Therefore, it is unclear whether the traditional and conservative Muslim communities will approve of the textbook, or if it may create additional discontent.

Yet another priority pursued by non-governmental organizations is encouraging civil engagement among the youth through implementing educational and cultural projects designed to support the integration of ethnic and religious minorities. The thematic framework varies across the priorities of organizations. However, in most cases, the scope covers educational courses, lectures, and trainings for mixed ethnic and religious minority groups.

It should be noted that over the past few years Tbilisi-based organizations have been increasingly prioritizing regional inclusion through implementing various educational and cultural projects in Pankisi, Kvemo Kartli, Samtskhe-Javakheti and Adjara, taking into consideration the specific conditions pertaining to each of these regions.

A religions club, which first started at the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD) is especially important. The club has expended beyond Tbilisi, and now provides a course of lectures to audiences in the aforementioned regions. A representative of CIPDD discussed the improved level of tolerance among beneficiaries, and the increase in the number of those who were willing to attend a series of lectures. However, it was also noted that Adjarian youth were less interested in discussing religions, compared to their peers from other regions.

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**Yet another priority pursued by non-governmental organizations is encouraging civil engagement among the youth through implementing educational and cultural projects designed to support the integration of ethnic and religious minorities.**

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**NGOs OPERATING IN KVEMO KARTLI**

Ethnic differences, rather than religious ones, continue to remain a key challenge for Georgia’s Azeri community in regards to their integration into the Georgian state. Despite a series of positive changes taking place in the region, lack of knowledge

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Most NGOs working in Kvemo Kartli prioritize programs offering Georgian language courses. Most of these courses focus on the youth, and are high in demand.

course has more than 300 beneficiaries annually. The respondent said around 20 percent of alumni have a full command of the language upon the completion of the course, while 50 percent of them finish with good speaking abilities. A strong emphasis is made on increasing the level of engagement of rural youth. It should be noted that a shift of focus from urban communities to villages is a priority shared across various organizations.

In addition to Georgian language courses, organizations working in the region implement general educational programs covering preparatory courses for final graders as well as math, English, and Russian language courses. These activities, as well as various language courses, are offered free of charge. Despite around 10 sports circles existing in Marneuli, the total number of youth attending these programs does not exceed 200. As for arts and culture, up to 100 youth pursue drawing, singing, playing traditional instruments, carpet weaving, and other artistic and cultural activities.

As stated by representatives of NGOs, sustainable promotion and support to similar activities is of utmost importance for the local youth of Marneuli, as they have no other alternative place for leisure and recreation, while cultural and sports circles promote healthy interest among the youth. In addition, they serve as a good means to encourage youth to participate in competitions as well as in cultural and sports events throughout the country.

In addition to educational projects, some NGOs also focus on various issues of local interest and try to promote civic activism amongst the local population. For instance, early marriages, the inadequate pre-school education system, and the implementation of inclusive education are among these issues. The Union of Democrat Women of Marneuli is particularly active in working on these issues. Marneuli based organizations consider the work undertaken by the Union as particularly effective, as local authorities support campaigns and measures led by the non-governmental sector. For a success story, they often mention public awareness campaigns on early marriages. The regional representation of USAID has also been named as an avid supporter of social campaigns in the region.

During interviews, some respondents also commented that of the organizations working on education and civic empowerment, only a few are actually effective. In general, the work of regional NGOs is financially supported by the Azerbaijani
gas and oil company SOCAR, international organizations such as USAID and World Vision, and also various foreign representations in Georgia including the diplomatic missions of the United States, Azerbaijan, Poland, and Japan.

**NGOs WORKING IN PANKISI GORGE**

There are few non-governmental organizations working in the gorge. However, the NGOs which operate in Pankisi are actively involved in the community’s daily life. The Kakheti Regional Development Center and Civil Activism Center stand out in this regard.

These organizations coordinate educational projects in the gorge. Also, local organizations have been trying to foster small entrepreneurship through establishing crafts workshops for both girls and boys. In addition, there are several programs providing vocational training for local groups. For instance, the Civic Activism Center has been implementing a project for improving employment opportunities for ethnic Kist youth and women with the support of the Administration of the President of Georgia. The Pankisi office of the Civil Activism Center implements several educational courses in driving, office computer programs, international accounting and ORIS accounting. The team, implementing the project plans to train up to 200 local youth.¹

Respondents say that the gap between Kist and Georgian communities has increased over the last 20 years on religious grounds.

Elimination of the alienation between Georgian and Kist youth on religious and ethnic grounds is yet another priority set by regional non-governmental organizations. Respondents say that the gap between Kist and Georgian communities has increased over the last 20 years on religious grounds. Therefore, local organizations prioritize addressing this gap, and an initiative to set up a bilingual community radio (broadcasting since March 2016) is one of the measures taken to overcome this gap.² Various educational projects also accommodate the purpose of bringing Kist and Georgian youth closer together.

The research has revealed that local Salafi followers have some grievances towards certain activities undertaken by the NGOs. As of today, no serious open confrontation has taken place between the two except for few altercations. However, it is unclear how developments might unfold in the gorge in future.

¹ CCA announces registration for new educational programs – courses will be provided free of charge. Civil Activism Center. Available at: [http://activities.ge/ge/detail/news/100/](http://activities.ge/ge/detail/news/100/)

² A choice and a new generation in Pankisi", Odishi TV. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdjOV5_2QI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdjOV5_2QI) (video material)
Council of Elder Women are also registered as not-for-profit organizations. The major goal of the former is to preserve and promote Kist traditions and lore, while the latter strive to consolidate around women’s interests and take joint efforts to bring changes to certain social relations established as traditions.

NGOs working in the Pankisi Gorge mostly focus on greater civic engagement, promotion of traditions and the implementation of various programs on socio-economic issues. So far, no organization working specifically on religious issues exists in the Pankisi Gorge.

**NGOs WORKING IN THE AUTONOMOUS REPUBLIC OF ADJARA**

Most of Adjara’s Muslim communities reside in agrarian and remote areas, and therefore their opportunities to participate in the Republic’s public life are quite limited. The attention paid to issues these communities have been facing is equally limited. The number of non-governmental organizations working in the region is small, and the scope of their work is also limited.

The Union of Georgian Muslims is the organization which is most active in Batumi. The scope of the Union’s work includes the implementation of religious and social projects. The Union started its activities in 2001, however, it was not officially registered until 2008. Donations are the major source of financial support for the Union. The major focus of the Union’s activities falls on religious and ethnic issues. In addition, the Union has been implementing educational activities. One of the important projects is to encourage greater civic engagement in addressing the pressing problems of Georgian Muslims. At the same time, the Union has been active in lobbying these problems to state authorities.

At the same time, migration flows beginning over the course of past few decades from high mountainous areas to the sea side has resulted in increasing the number of Georgian Muslim in Adjara’s urban parts. The aforementioned organization has been actively lobbying for the construction of a new mosque for local Muslims. The chair of the Union, Tariel Nakaidze, has also been elected as a leader of an initiative group pushing for the construction of the new mosque.¹

There are no specific integration projects in the region. The research has revealed that neither local nor international donor organizations consider this direction a priority.

Unlike the USAID office based in Marneuli, whose staff lend their space for public discussions of various important issues including religious matters and traditions, Batumi office representatives state that discussions around such issues are not welcome in the city, even though these matters are gaining momentum in the region.

¹ This is a new interim initiative group set up in the beginning of 2016. The group demands that the authorities give permission for the construction of a new mosque in Batumi as the older one cannot take increasing number of prisoners.
GEORGIAN MEDIA AND ITS IMPACT ON THE INTEGRATION PROCESS OF THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY
THE ACTIVITIES OF CENTRAL MEDIA OUTLETS

In the modern world, media is the major means for the spread of information. Because of this ability, media plays an important role in shaping public opinion. The media is often a conductor of information and has a power to introduce certain issues to the broader public and put them under the spotlight. Therefore, the way media sources cover issues or topics has considerable influence on shaping opinions and perceptions of the public towards these issues. If the media is biased in a certain direction, it becomes complicated to nurture healthy and open debates among the wider public.

Georgia is no exception in this regard. Respondents believe that the Georgian media is characterized with unsustainability unhealthy internal processes, lack of transparency and vulnerability towards ongoing political processes. For the objectives of the research, it is important to determine the role of media in integration processes, and how Georgia’s Muslim communities perceive this role.

The media is under intense scrutiny by non-governmental organizations, who seek to identify discrepancies and develop their respective recommendations.1 Respondents believe that while covering the latest incidents taking place in the regions, media sources tend to distort information and provide biased coverage of events. The policies of media outlets are to be blamed for such distorted coverage, and the incident in Ponichala which claimed a life of a young man is a good example. According to widely circulated information, a confrontation took place on religious grounds between representatives of Shia and Salafi movements in Ponichala.2 At a field stage of the research, the team met with a representative of Ponichala’s local civil society. The respondent relayed that the deceased and the killer had been longtime friends, and that the confrontation took place on non-religious grounds. However, it was the Georgian media which gave the incident a religious tint after they had found out that the killer was a follower of the Salafi movement.

The research also found that there have been cases of media being ignorant of important developments, and an incident taking place in Tsikhisdziri, Adjara is one example. The incident involved three intoxicated solders who stopped cars to find out whether

1 Monitoring of hate speech and discriminatory expressions in Georgian media. 2013. Available at: https://www.osgf.ge/files/2013/publikaciebi%202013/Hate_Speech.pdf
3 A young man has been killed. Rustavi 2, 02/01/2016. Available at: http://rustavi2.com/ka/news/35688
their drivers were Christians or Muslims. If the driver confirmed that they were Muslims, the solders would threaten to kill them. The only news outlet which covered the incident was Interpressnews, an online source.

The research aimed to analyze not only central TV channels, but also provide an overview of the general media space in relation to the Muslim community; therefore, the team of researchers also looked at the activities of regional media.

**PANKISI GORGE**

As a result of the military actions which took place in the second half of 1990s in the North Caucasus, the Pankisi Gorge made the headlines of national and international media. Because of various subjective and objective reasons, the area was announced as a so-called “hotbed” of terrorism. Despite a series of changes in Georgia in general and in the Pankisi Gorge specifically, this perception of the gorge has not changed. In this regard, numerous underlying factors, both internal and external, have independent effects on the situation.

Interviews conducted in Pankisi corroborated that the attitudes of the local community to mass media, regardless of the particular media means, are extremely negative. Most respondents said they were not happy with media coverage and underlined three following tendencies:

- First and foremost, while regional media outlets present a mix of negative and positive coverage the Pankisi Gorge receives only negative coverage by central broadcasters. For instance, several local and international news stories aired during the recent period viewed the gorge only in the wider context of terrorism. However, based on information available to state agencies and the non-governmental sector, there has not been solid evidence proving that there are terrorist cells or groups active in the Pankisi Gorge. In addition, it should also be noted that coverage of processes ongoing in Pankisi is devoid of a national perspective and regional context.
- Secondly, information obtained locally is often distorted in footages prepared by media sources. The local community believes that the media visit the gorge with an already prepared story, and only seek materials which support their narrative. When they find materials for coverage in Pankisi, they often distort information obtained from the local community.
- The third tendency seems apparent, concerning the occurrences outlined above. Often, issues and processes of great local importance tend to be ignored by the media. For instance, drastic positive changes demonstrated by a decline in crime in the gorge slipped from media attention. The local community notes that there has not been a single case of murder for the last 10 years in Pankisi, while drug related crimes are almost non-existent, a huge leap forward from the situation in 1990s.
- Respondents could remember only a single case when central media sources managed to show the gorge from an entirely different angle. Specifically, they mentioned footage prepared by Imedi TV, which highlighted the local lore and rites of the Kist com-
Respondents believe that this type of coverage supports the process of integration and helps to destroy deeply rooted stereotypes and clichés.

To conclude, the Pankisi community perceives the Georgian media space quite negatively. Most coverage seeks to obtain and spread scandalous information, which increases a gap between the gorge and the rest of the country, and defies the state integration policy.

**ADJARA REGION**

Due to the fact that the Adjara region is an autonomous entity with internal structures and resources of its own, it receives much broader media coverage than Pankisi gorge. In addition, the region enjoys the presence of strong local media outlets which ensure that the information they obtain and spread is impartial. This ability of local media constrains the possibility of central media sources to provide their own interpretation of materials.

Respondents point out that over the course of last few years, the media has been actively covering issues facing the region’s Muslim communities through preparing footage which provides neutral and impartial coverage of local processes. Local journalists who are aware of local and regional specifics are believed to contribute to impartial and adequate coverage of local events.

The research has revealed that the most burning issue in the region is related to a contested construction of the new mosque in Batumi, which is broadly covered by local media.

**KVEMO KARTLI**

Based on the specific regional conditions of Kvemo Kartli region, the challenges for media are somewhat different from those described above. Because most of the region’s population are ethnic Azeris, lack of knowledge of the state language remains the key challenge. As already mentioned, local communities are exclusively indifferent to media. Respondents in Kvemo Kartli said that because they cannot understand Georgian, they watch Azeri channels aired through satellite.

Respondents also said they would welcome Russian language broadcasters, recalling an initiative voiced by Paata Zakareishvili, who stated that he was aware of the

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1. *The Most Mystical Place – Pankisi gorge.* Part 1. The other aspect with Gia Jajanidze. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQcJs68NtME.
The presence of the problem and would be happy if any media outlet volunteered to broadcast in Russian.

The weakness of media sources and insufficient knowledge of Georgian among local Azeri communities create barriers to covering local problems by central media outlets.

The role played by the Georgian media in the process of integration of Muslim communities is diverse. Experts agree that there is a lack of expertise, knowledge and good will which further increases the risk of biased coverage and supports the establishment of wrong perceptions amongst the broader public. The media mainly focuses on scandals and PR which often becomes a subject of discontent for both state and non-state actors. However, attitudes of Muslim communities differ across the regions. In areas which enjoy strong media outlets, local events and processes tend to receive broader coverage, which translates into positive attitudes of the local communities towards media (Adjara); while in those regions which have weaker media sources, central broadcasters tend to ignore local processes (Marneuli) or if they do cover local problems, stories are often biased and distorted (Pankisi Gorge).
RECOMMENDATIONS
Based on our research, we recommend that:

1. Authorities revisit a holistic policy pertaining to the Muslim community. The State should develop tailored policies reflecting on the regional specifics of Muslim communities.

2. The State implements a consistent reintegration policy and commit to finalizing ongoing projects while using respective analysis for more informed decisions. The State should develop a long-term vision resistant to political fluctuations.

3. The State should ensure effective implementation of existing legal acts.

4. Stakeholders undertaking efforts towards the integration of Muslim communities should deepen their cooperation and ensure regular exchange of visions and information.

5. The State should utilize and maintain resources including professional staff available in its structures to effectively build on the knowledge and experience pertaining to integration of the Muslim community.

6. All measures should be taken to facilitate the engagement of Muslim communities in political processes and work of official structures; also, to ensure that Muslim communities are adequately represented in local government bodies in the regions with large Muslim population.

7. Measures should be taken to attract more talented and educated Muslim youth to state structures, in order to accelerate full integration of the Muslim community.

8. Measures should be taken to determine a legal status of all mosques in Georgia and their ownership forms, in order to bring more clarity to the organizational-structural operation of the Muslim community. Also, procedures for issuing permits for construction of new mosques should be regulated at a legislative level.

9. The state should push for healthy processes to be initiated in the Ministry of Education and Science, and ensure de-politicization of such processes.

10. Relationship patterns between the State and the Church should be revisited in order to shake the influence of the dominant religion institutions over public servants.

11. The role of media in these processes should be analyzed, and the media should increase their engagement in this direction.

To the State Agency on Religious Issues

1. Skepticism towards the work of the Agency will persist unless it refreshes its staff and includes those individuals who enjoy trust from the general public. Alternatively, the agency should fulfill their functions in such a manner which will ensure that suspicions are debunked.

2. The agency should promote and support the autonomy of the Administration of Muslims of all Georgia.
3. The agency should develop recommendations in a timely manner and make all efforts to protect their visions to the best of its capacity.

4. In order to prevent the disengagement of part of the Muslim community in the Pankisi Gorge, the agency should develop modes of cooperation with local Salafi followers.

5. The agency should facilitate a constructive and productive dialogue around the construction of the new mosque in Batumi.

6. The agency should provide timely response to actions undertaken by the country's dominant denomination and engage in constructive discussions around these issues with the Georgian Patriarchate.

- To The Ministry of Education and Science:

1. Develop measures to end the flawed practice of interminable reforms within the education system.

2. Develop a relevant long-term vision, strategy and action plan for the education system in cooperation with various stakeholders.

3. Develop long-term projects and set up a mechanism to monitor their effective implementation and ensure relevance with new challenges.

4. Create measures for the inclusion of Muslim spiritual schools into the education system.

5. Assess the effectiveness of Georgian language programs and encourage learning of Georgian language among rural communities, including the elderly.

6. Consider regional specifics while developing language courses. More specifically, the Ministry should build local capacity to access and utilize modern technologies.

- To the Public Defender’s Office:

1. Include the Georgian Orthodox Church in an inter-religious format

- To The Administration of Muslims of All Georgia:

1. Ensure progressive autonomy from state agencies.

2. Take measures for further improving internal organizational structure and recruiting professional staff.

3. Cooperate with Georgian state agencies (in particular with the Ministry of Education and Science) in order to promote accreditation of Islamic religious junior and middle schools and help them improve school syllabi. In addition, the Administration should facilitate a dialogue around the establishment of higher religious education institutions and advocate for timely resolution of the issue.

4. Continue to develop formats for the cooperation with communities beyond the scope of the Administration's jurisdiction.
o To The Georgian Holy Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church:

1. Take measures to implement their declared policy towards the Muslim community, in particular ensuring that activities of some members of clergy in the regions are in line with this policy.
2. Provide timely responses to and share responsibility for any deviant actions by particular members of the clergy.
3. Support and promote tolerance and acceptance towards other religious denominations within members of the clergy.

o To Local and international non-governmental organizations operating in Georgia:

1. Further strengthen their cooperation with government agencies. In many instances the relationship has not been constructive, thus damaging the interests of the Muslim community. It is recommended that the parties should consolidate their stances as positively as possible in order to ensure the selection of best policies in this respect.
2. Facilitate the exchange of information pertaining to religious groups, especially with regards to traditions, rites and lore of Georgia’s Muslim communities, in order to foster integrational processes among the latter. NGOs should work not only with minority groups, but also with representatives of dominant groups.
3. Remain mindful of diversity within Georgia’s Muslim community and lack of communication between sub-groups while planning their interventions.
4. Assess the effectiveness of their interventions supporting integration processes in the Pankisi Gorge in order to be able to obtain a buy-in from several local groups who are not supportive of their interventions.
5. Reinforce programming on civic activism in order to address the gap in regional representations of NGOs (except for Kvemo Kartli region).
6. Evaluate cost-effectiveness of Georgian language courses and collect outcomes of interventions undertaken in Kvemo Kartli over the last 10 years. It is of great importance to understand the efficiency of expenses incurred for the purpose of achieving these outcomes and how to maximize their impact in the future.
7. Foster educational, sports and cultural activities in regions with large Muslim population. Civic engagement will further strengthen integration processes.
o To Local media:

1. Reconcile their activities with the Journalists’ Ethical Charter. This is especially pertinent to central media outlets, which stand out with their lack of professionalism, intentional distortion of information and other negative traits.
2. Intensify monitoring over media outlets by representatives of the Journalists’ Ethical Charter and provide timely and adequate response to violation of the Charter.
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The desk research heavily relies on the communication with the following state agencies (Tbilisi):
- Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia (an interview)
- National Assessment and Examination Center (an interview)
- National Center for Teachers Professional Development (an interview)
- Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs of Georgia (an interview)
- Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality (an interview)
- Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia (a letter)
- Office of the Public Defender of Georgia (an interview)
- Ministry of Labor, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia (a letter)
- Ministry of Corrections of Georgia (a letter)
- State Agency on Religious Issues (an interview)
- Council of Tbilisi City municipality (an interview)

Local Non-government organizations (Tbilisi)
- Center for Civil Integration and Inter-ethnic Relations (an interview)
- Tolerance and Diversity Institute (an interview)
- Civil Integration Foundation (an interview)
- Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (an interview)
- Youth Development Academy (an interview)
- Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (an interview)
- Center for Security and Development of Georgia (an interview)

Local representations of international organizations (Tbilisi):
- Regional office of the European Centre for Minority Issues (an interview)

Independent experts (Tbilisi):
- Mamuka Areshidze (an interview)

Religious associations (Tbilisi):
- Administration of Muslims of All Georgia (an interview)
- Georgian Orthodox Church (an interview)

Field work was conducted in the following three regions of Georgia: Kvemo Kartli (Marneuli), Pankisi, Adjara (Batumi city, Kobuleti, Akhalsheni village, Shuakhevi village, Keda village); also, Zemo (upper) Ponichala (within administrative boundary of Tbilisi city).

Meetings were conducted in the following state agencies located in Marneuli (Kvemo Kartli):
- Marneuli municipality Gamgeoba (an interview)
- Marneuli Education Resource Center (an interview)
- Georgian school N3 (an interview)
- Regional learning center of Zurab Zhvania School of Public Administration in Marneuli (an interview)
- Azerbaijani school in Marneuli (an interview)

The following non-governmental organizations:
- Center of Azerbaijani Culture (an interview)
- Tea House (an interview)
- Society of Democratic Women of Marneuli (an interview)
- Civil Integration Foundation (an interview)
- Marneuli Youth Center (an interview)
- House of Azerbaijani Culture (an interview)
The following international organizations:
- Marneuli Civic Engagement Center (USAID’s office in Marneuli) (an interview)

The following religious establishments:
- Imam Husayn mosque in Marneuli (an interview)
- Imam Ali mosque in Marneuli (an interview)
- Jeyhun Muhamed Ali - a representative of Marneuli’s Muslim community) (an interview)
- Ferdowsi Jafarov - a representative of local civil society in the village of Zemo Ponichala (an interview)

In Pankisi gorge the meetings were conducted with the following agencies/individuals:
- A representative of local authorities to the village of Duisi in Pankisi gorge (an interview)
- Musa Goderdzishvili press spokesperson of Salafi community - (an interview)
- Duisi school (an interview)
- Council of the Elderly of Pankisi (an interview)
- Imam of the Sunni mosque (an interview)

With the following non-governmental organizations:
- Kakheti Regional Development Fund (an interview)
- Civil Activity Foundation (an interview)

In Adjara region meetings were conducted with the following individuals:
In Batumi
- Editor in chief of Batumelebi newspaper (an interview)
- A journalist of Media Palitra (an interview)
- A professor of Shota Rustaveli State University (an interview)
- A chairperson of the Union of Georgian Muslims (an interview)
- A representative of USAID’s local office (an interview)
- Mufti and a dputy mufti of western Georgia (an interview)
- Mufti of Khulo (an interview)

In Akhalsheni village:
- Imam of the local mosque (an interview)

In Shuakhevi village:
- Imam of the local mosque (an interview)

In Kobuleti:
- Khojah of local boarding school (an interview)