

ZOiS

Zentrum für Osteuropa-
und internationale Studien
*Centre for East European
and International Studies*

No. 1 / 2021 · January 2021

ZOIS REPORT

FAITH, STATE, AND RELIGIOUS COMPETITION IN GEORGIA

Tsypylma Darieva

Content

02 __ **Summary**

04 __ **Introduction**

05 ____ Methodology

06 __ **Faith and state in Georgia: the dominance of the Orthodox Church**

09 __ **Religious trends in Adjara**

13 __ **Access to religious education**

15 __ **Contested sites of worship**

17 ____ The Ahali Mosque: the most controversial site

20 ____ The Batumi Cathedral of the Mother of God: an invisible conflict

22 __ **Conclusion**

24 __ **Imprint**

Summary

This report investigates the relationship between state and faith in Georgia and demonstrates how religious plurality has unfolded in the country, with particular attention on the hegemonic position of the Georgian Orthodox Church. Increasing religious pluralisation and the presence of religious difference have resulted in public debates on the disadvantaged position of religious minorities. In urban spaces, religious contestation has become visible.

The report is based on an analysis of policy documents, expert interviews, and ethnographic observations during fieldwork conducted in 2018 and 2019 in Batumi, Georgia's multi-religious second city, located on the Black Sea coast. The study discusses the legal framework for governing religious diversity and looks at local negotiations and perceptions of religious inequality.

The study is part of a ZOiS research project that explores patterns of religious pluralisation in post-atheist societies and the conditions that generate contestation and peaceful co-habitation in multi-ethnic and emerging multi-religious societies.¹ By analysing qualitative interviews with secular experts and religious leaders, the report sheds light on the rise of religious competition and inequality in Georgia.

¹ See Tsypylma Darieva, 'Faith and State in Azerbaijan: Governing Religious Plurality', Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS), Report 3 / 2020.

Key findings

- One of the legacies of Georgia’s socialist past is a lack of established arrangements and frameworks for governing religious plurality.
- National, Georgian identity and religious, Orthodox Christian identity have converged over the last thirty years. At the same time, interest in a pluralist vision of the country has been growing, and Georgian society is becoming more religiously diverse.
- When it comes to religious freedom, the relationships between religious actors and the state are not always harmonious. Accommodating religious minorities is an uneasy and uneven process.
- While national laws and the state’s recent policy towards faith claim to be sources of religious regulation and tolerance of diversity, cities produce their own on-the-ground modes of regulation that privilege distinct religious groups in public spaces.
- Given the hegemonic position of the Orthodox Church, religious competition for status and recognition among religious minorities can take different forms. Conflicting approaches to a given religious site can remain latent or hidden or can escalate into visible confrontation.
- Ownership of territory, control over places of worship, and access to religious education are crucial for the analysis of religious plurality.
- Georgia’s ruling elites face political and cultural challenges as new identity configurations emerge based on the possibility of being simultaneously Georgian and non-Orthodox. Contestation over the establishment of non-Orthodox places of worship in urban spaces may become part of larger political competition that could challenge not only administrative authorities but also patterns of national belonging.

Introduction

Post-Soviet Georgia is among the most religious of thirty-four European countries. According to a 2018 survey by the Pew Research Center and the 2018 Caucasus Barometer survey, almost 50 per cent of Georgia's population is highly religious.² Seventy-three per cent believes in God with absolute certainty, 60 per cent of those aged 18–35 go to church once a month or more, and relatively few adults identify as atheist. Just over 83 per cent of Georgia's population is Orthodox Christian.

Within this framework, the Georgian Orthodox Church has taken on a prominent role in the formation of the nation, in the country's identity politics, and in everyday life. The religious institutions of the Orthodox Church have an important impact on a wide range of cultural, social, and political issues. Especially noticeable is the strong presence of the Orthodox Church in the public sphere, which has led to rising tensions in relations with civil society representatives and religious minorities.³

At the same time, Georgia is one of the most multi-religious societies in the South Caucasus. More than 13 per cent of the population is made up of Sunni and Shia Muslims, and 3 per cent belongs to the Armenian Apostolic Church. These two groups are the largest religious minorities in Georgia. A further 3 per cent of the population consists of Roman Catholics, Yezidis, Greek Orthodox Christians, Jews, and a growing number of new religious groups, such as Baptists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, and the Baha'i faith.⁴ Like in other post-Soviet societies, the public presence of religious diversity in Georgia is driven by a liberalisation of religious policy and globalisation. In addition, external influences from Turkey, Russia, and the United States play significant roles in Georgia's religious diversity.

Since 1991, a law on religious freedom has allowed public expressions of religiosity in Georgia. As Georgia's main national narrative is based on the unity of Orthodoxy, the Georgian language, and the homeland, ethnic and religious minorities pose a variety of challenges to existing patterns of identity.⁵ As two broad categories, ethnic and religious minorities can overlap, although this is not always the case. This report asks how religious plurality is accommodated and perceived in a society dominated by one religion. Despite increasing religious diversity, which calls into question the status of the national self, the Orthodox Church remains the central symbol of national cultural identity in today's dominant social narrative.

2 'How religious is your country?', Pew Research Center, 5 December 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/interactives/how-religious-is-your-country/>; 'Caucasus Barometer 2019 Georgia', Caucasus Research Resource Center, <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2019ge/RELIMP/>.

3 See Silvia Serrano, 'The Georgian Church: Embodiment of National Unity or Opposition Force?', *Russian Politics and Law* 52, no. 4 (December 2014): 74–92, <https://doi.org/10.2753/RUP1061-1940520404>.

4 National Statistics Office of Georgia, www.geostat.ge.

5 The level of ethnic minorities' engagement in public life in Georgia is relatively low. This is particularly evident with regard to their participation in political life as well as their representation in elected bodies and governmental agencies.

Methodology

To examine the dynamics of religious pluralisation on the national and local levels, this report takes a twofold approach: top down and bottom up. On the national level, the research examines how the authorities respond in a top-down way to growing religious diversity, what agencies of secular and religious governance operate in contemporary Georgia, and how minorities perceive religious issues in relation to the Orthodox Church. Based on analyses of policy documents and interviews with local experts, this approach provides a general framework for understanding relations between faith and state in Georgia.

On a local level, a bottom-up perspective includes in-depth explorations of lived religious plurality in Batumi, the capital of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara, a region of Georgia that borders Turkey. Adjara is a unique borderland in Georgia because of its status of peaceful territorial autonomy. Despite cultural differences, rural-urban migration, and some contestation, there have been no secessionist claims in the region, unlike in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

As a vibrant and rapidly developing multi-religious city on the Black Sea coast, Batumi offered an appropriate setting for this bottom-up perspective. An arena of power and urban reconstruction, the city is a locus for the manifestation, negotiation, and appropriation of places of worship, and the presence of religious difference creates challenges for urban governance and believers alike. More precisely, religious sites function as venues of contact, tension, and affirmation of national identities. Not only do the iconic forms of these sites trigger an interest in the city's religious objects, but they also create tools for understanding different perceptions, ordering contested narratives, and regulating religious competition.

Religious sites function as venues of contact, tension, and affirmation of national identities.

To analyse patterns of interaction between faith and state, the author employed a mixed-methods approach by collecting qualitative and quantitative data covering a variety of religious communities in Batumi.⁶ Altogether, the sample contained six religious affiliations: Orthodox Christians, Sunni Muslims, Catholics, Protestants, and the Armenian Apostolic and Jewish communities.

In addition to ethnographic observations, twenty-three semi-structured interviews were conducted between winter 2018 and spring 2019. They can be classified into three main groups: six interviews were with religious leaders and representatives of the clergy, seven were with secular experts, and ten were with religious experts. For the purposes of this report, religious leaders are those who hold a spiritual office; secular experts are not primarily followers of a religious community but speak as professional experts about religious developments; and religious experts are primarily followers or members of a religious community or are employed by a religious institution. The average age of the interviewees was 45. Eighteen men and five women were interviewed.

⁶ The author is grateful to Ketevan Khutsishvili and Boris Komakhidze of Tbilisi State University for their research cooperation during fieldwork in Batumi and to Sina Giesemann of ZOiS for her support in the data analysis.

The data collection was aimed at conducting a representative study on a city level seeking to reveal trends in self-perceptions on the ground and modes of religious competition.

Faith and state in Georgia: the dominance of the Orthodox Church

Officially, religion in Georgia is separate from the state. However, the Georgian constitution recognises an exceptional role for the Georgian Orthodox Church in the country. The church has the right to teach religious studies in state schools, and Orthodox institutions are involved in the process of rewriting post-Soviet Georgia's history as it appears in school textbooks. The church's privileged status was fixed in 2002 to ensure the patriarch's legal immunity and give the church a consultative role in governance issues. Consequently, political parties—both liberal and conservative—refer to the authority of the church to strengthen their positions.

A concordat, or constitutional agreement, shapes legal relations between the state and the Orthodox Church. The agreement defines the church's unique status as a legal entity of public law (LEPL), so that the church enjoys freedom on legal and tax matters, including questions of property, and free use of religious buildings. The state recognises all Orthodox churches and monasteries across Georgia, as well as their remains and the land on which they are built, as possessions of the church. Only the Orthodox Church has the right to acquire agricultural state property free of charge; all other religious organisations must pay a fee.⁷

While the concordat and other legal frameworks were established to consolidate the hegemonic position of the Orthodox Church, religious life in Georgia has become increasingly diverse. A wide range of structures governs the current uneven relations between majority and minority religious communities. Like other post-Soviet countries, Georgia has classified religious communities as either traditional or non-traditional denominations. This top-down classification is based on each community's historical ties to the country. Among the communities considered traditional are Muslims, Jews, the Armenian Apostolic Church, and the Roman Catholic Church.

In response to growing criticism from international and human rights organisations, in 2011 Georgia amended its Civil Code. The amendment allowed the four non-Orthodox traditional religious groups to register as LEPLs. Generally, to obtain legal recognition and certain benefits, a religious association can register with the National Agency for the Public Registry as either an LEPL or a non-commercial organisation. But only those that can demonstrate a historical link to the country or are verified as a religion by the Council of Europe receive LEPL status. Registration did not provide any privileged status for the non-Orthodox groups; they are still treated as private organisations

Religious life in Georgia has become increasingly diverse.

7 '2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Georgia (June 10)', U.S. Embassy in Georgia, 10 June 2020, <https://ge.usembassy.gov/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom-georgia-june-10/>.

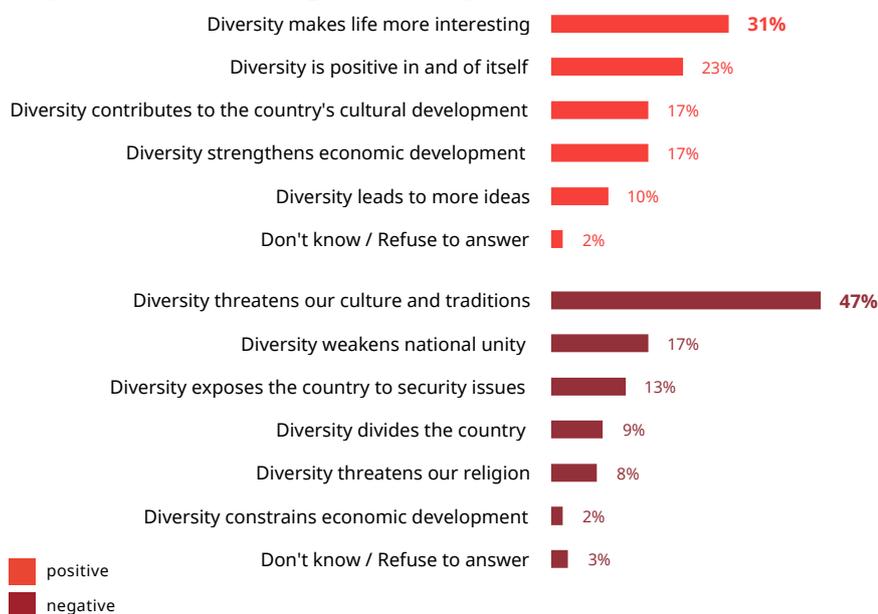
and, unlike the Orthodox Church, are not exempt from property taxes. Public funding for religious organisations takes the form of direct subsidies. However, unlike for the Orthodox Church, state authorities control the purpose and funding of non-Orthodox religious groups, raising questions about the autonomy of these organisations.

Since 2014, there has been a loose institutionalisation of the governance of Georgia's religious diversity. Partly in line with rulings by the European Court of Human Rights and the European Court of Justice, in 2014 the Georgian government established the State Agency on Religious Affairs, which became a centralised agency for religious policy. Similar institutions exist in other former Soviet republics, and often their principles of governance are inherited from the Soviet past. Georgia's agency imposes controls and restrictions on minority religious organisations and is less focused on the protection of minority rights, the promotion of pluralist views, or any inclusive policy towards non-Orthodox denominations.⁸ The Administration of All Georgian Muslims — the part of the state agency that deals with Muslim affairs — is perceived by many Muslims as a formal, top-down administrative body and has so far not been fully recognised by Georgian grass-roots Muslim organisations.

Religious diversity has been present for centuries in heterogeneous Georgia. Interestingly, in a survey carried out in August 2018 by the Caucasus Research Resource Center, 47 per cent of Georgians said they viewed religious diversity as a threat to their culture and traditions, while 31 per cent thought diversity made life more interesting.⁹ ► **FIGURE 1** The current Georgian constitution

FIGURE 1

Respondents' view on religious diversity



Source: authors' own graph; data source: Council of Europe, November 2018; Hate crime, hate speech, and discrimination in Georgia, August 2018

8 Author and Giorgi Tadumadze interview with Tamta Mikeladze, associate professor in public law at Ilia State University and director of the Equality Policy Programme at the Human Rights Education and Monitoring Centre, November 2019.

9 'Hate crime, hate speech, and discrimination in Georgia: attitudes and awareness', Council of Europe, November 2018, <https://rm.coe.int/hate-crime-hate-speech-and-discrimination-in-attitudes-and-awareness-e/16808ef62a>.

The divergent responses to the Covid-19 measures reflected unequal relations between majority and minority religions.

provides for freedom of religion and equality for all, regardless of religion. However, given the monopolising views of the Orthodox Church, today some minority religious groups complain that they are not treated equally.¹⁰

In this context, two processes are occurring simultaneously: the rise of the Orthodox Church at the political level and the marginalisation of religious minorities, which face systematic difficulties in their public expressions of religiosity. The state is openly loyal to the dominant religious institution, and within the existing frameworks the state often sidesteps issues of religious regulation.

For instance, the divergent responses of faith leaders to the measures imposed to deal with the Covid-19 crisis reflected unequal relations between majority and minority religions. In contrast to Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim communities, the Orthodox Church explicitly operated independently from the state regulations and—withstanding growing criticism from civil society organisations—shared the power-political stage with the government. While most religious sites remained closed or offered online prayers during the pandemic, the Orthodox Church largely continued to hold its traditional services in churches. Despite the government's exhortations, churches kept their doors open for Easter celebrations. In spring 2020, the church broadly ignored government-imposed restrictions such as physical distancing and hygiene rules.

This continued adherence to traditional religious practices has cast the special role and authority of the Orthodox Church, as compared with other faith communities in Georgia, into sharp relief. By contrast, Georgia's Muslim leaders suspended prayer gatherings during Ramadan, while the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia, and the Armenian Apostolic Church opted to live-stream Sunday services. Despite the increased risk of the virus being spread by traditional religious practices, the Georgian government seemed reluctant to impose emergency rules on the Orthodox Church.

Besides the authority of the Orthodox Church during the Covid-19 pandemic, the church's visible dominance is apparent in everyday religious place-making. Alongside classical churches and monastery complexes, Orthodox Christian symbols are widespread in urban public spaces. Over the last two decades, many small, informal sacred sites have appeared, decorated with crosses and icons. Ordinary residents are allowed to install small, homemade wooden, iron, or concrete crosses on street corners, in courtyards of residential neighbourhoods, in city parks, or on beaches. Backed by the Orthodox clergy, city administrations widely tolerate such small constructions.¹¹

Georgia lacks established frameworks for faith-state interactions and therefore sees growing claims and counterclaims from a variety of religious minorities. The presence of religious difference has resulted in public debates on the disadvantaged positions of religious minorities. Beyond an

FIGURE 2

Cross at the beach in Batumi, March 2019



Source: Jens Liebchen

10 Inga Popovaite, 'Sunni and Shia Muslims in Georgia: a Societal Margin in Motion?', *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 81 (2016): 13 – 17; interview with Ruslan Baramidze, a senior researcher at Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University, Berlin, 14 November 2019.

11 Author interview with Giorgi Ramishvili, an architect, Batumi, March 2019.

asymmetric legal and institutional environment, non-dominant religious groups experience moral exclusion and legal inequality.¹² For instance, according to a study by the not-for-profit Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI), in 2012–14 ‘persecution, limitation, and discriminatory treatment of Muslims and Jehovah’s Witnesses obtained a more systematic and large-scale format, and became especially problematic’.¹³ As examples, the study cited attacks on Kingdom Halls—the places of worship of Jehovah’s Witnesses—in several cities, the illegal demolition of a minaret in the village of Chela.

There are also inequalities in issues of maintaining religious infrastructure. Disputes over places of worship play a particular role. For instance, disparities exist among religious communities on questions of post-Soviet restitution, planning permission to build or repair places of worship, and access to or promotion of religious education. According to the TDI study, in 2014 the Armenian Apostolic Church requested from the Georgian government the restitution of six churches that had been left functionless and were referred to as ‘contested churches’ because the Orthodox Church also claimed ownership of them.¹⁴ As of this writing, the restitution request is still unresolved at the local level.

Religious trends in Adjara

Georgia’s Autonomous Republic of Adjara is a unique region not only in historical and territorial contexts but also in terms of its religious and ethnic composition. As a peripheral autonomous district that borders Turkey (► FIGURE 3), Adjara is home to Georgia’s second-largest Muslim community: Sunni Muslims of Georgian ethnicity and language. They differ from other Muslim groups in Georgia, in particular Azeri-speaking Muslims in Tbilisi and the south-eastern part of the Kvemo Kartli region and the Sunni Muslim Kists who live on the border between Georgia and Russia. In comparison with Azeri-speaking Shia Muslims and other Sunni Muslims in Georgia, Adjarian Muslims are in a peculiar situation as they identify as ethnic Georgians. However, sometimes Georgians view Adjarians as not ‘completely’ Georgian because of their faith; but at the same time, Adjarians are perceived as not completely ‘other’ either because they speak Georgian as their native language.

Religious demography in Georgia has become increasingly diverse, and in Adjara’s capital, Batumi, different religious groups tend to live together. According to the State Agency for Religious Issues, Batumi has a population of around 153,000. Of this total, Orthodox Christians make up 60 per cent, Muslims 33.8 per cent, and members of the Armenian Apostolic Church 0.4 per cent. Other minorities include Catholics, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Yezidis, Jews, and others.¹⁵ Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Catholics, the Armenian

FIGURE 3
Map of Adjara



Source: ZOIS

12 See Tamta Mikeladze, ‘Freedom of Religion: Critique of Discriminatory and Nonsecular State Policy’, Human Rights Education and Monitoring Centre (EMC), 2016, 7.

13 ‘Assessment of the Needs of Religious Organisations’, Tolerance and Diversity Institute, 2014, 9.

14 Ibid., 22.

15 State Agency for Religious Issues, <https://religion.gov.ge> (last accessed 26 October 2020).

Apostolic Church, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Church of the Gospel Faith have been registered as religious organisations.

An important characteristic of Adjara's religious diversity is the fact that in the 1990s, the Orthodox Church was engaged in converting atheist non-Orthodox Georgians to the national Orthodox Church, and many Adjarians did so on a voluntary basis.¹⁶ In the mid- and late 1990s, baptisms of children and Christian conversions of adults in Adjara were common acts. However, according to the 2019 Caucasus Barometer survey, over the last ten years there has been a slow but steady decline in trust in the church.¹⁷ Recent scandals over paedophilia and the response to the Covid-19 pandemic have led to a further slump in Georgians' trust in the church.

Because of mutual influences, there is also flexibility in certain religious acts.¹⁸ Some Islamic practices of Adjarian Muslims, such as the interior decoration of mosques and the use of wooden coffins in funeral ceremonies, are influenced by Christian traditions.¹⁹ These influences are a product of long-term interaction between Christians and Muslims that goes back to the medieval period.

Another interesting feature of Adjara's religious flexibility is its high level of mixed marriages. Alongside acts of religious conversion, almost 40 per cent of interviewees mentioned patterns of mixed marriage between Muslims and Christians. The 2019 Caucasus Barometer survey provides a similar account of a relatively high number of mixed marriages across Georgia. Thirty-nine per cent of Georgian respondents said they would approve of women of their ethnicity marrying Azerbaijanis or Armenians living in Georgia.²⁰

The proportion of Muslims is much higher in Adjara than in Georgia as a whole, and the region's population is more religiously hybrid. ► FIGURES 4 + 5 However, over the last three decades, religious intolerance and hostility towards Georgian Muslims have produced challenges for Adjarians.²¹ After Georgia became independent in 1991, anti-Islamic views increased from Georgian nationalists who viewed Islam as a backward ideology associated with the country's dark Ottoman past and incompatible with the Georgian national character.²² Independence and Georgia's new orientation towards Europe led to a further marginalisation of Muslims in Adjara by the state and Georgian nationalist forces as the main national narrative in Georgia is based on the unity of Orthodoxy, the Georgian language, and the homeland. In terms of ethnicity, most of the population of Adjara—and of Georgia as a whole—is classified as ethnic Georgian. ► FIGURE 6

16 Mathijs Pelkmans, *Defending the Border: Identity, Religion, and Modernity in the Republic of Georgia* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2006).

17 'Caucasus Barometer 2019 Georgia', Caucasus Research Resource Center, <https://caucasus-barometer.org/en/cb2019ge/codebook/> (accessed 3 December 2020).

18 Compare Franziska Smolnik, Andrea Weiss, and Yana Zabanova, 'Political space and borderland practices in Abkhazia and Adjara: exploring the role of Ottoman legacies and contemporary Turkish influences', *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 58, no. 5 (2017): 557–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2017.1418671>.

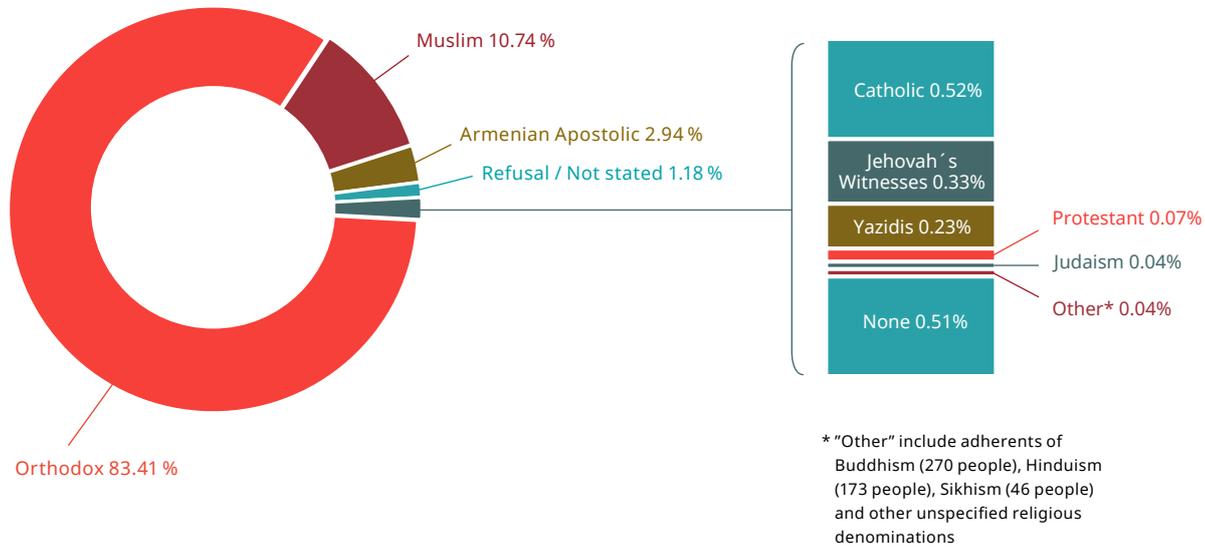
19 George Sanikidze, 'Muslim Communities of Georgia: Old Problems and New Challenges', *Islamophobic Studies Journal* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 247–65, <https://doi.org/10.13169/islstudj.4.2.0247>.

20 'Caucasus Barometer 2019 Georgia', Caucasus Research Resource Center.

21 '2019 Report', U.S. Embassy in Georgia.

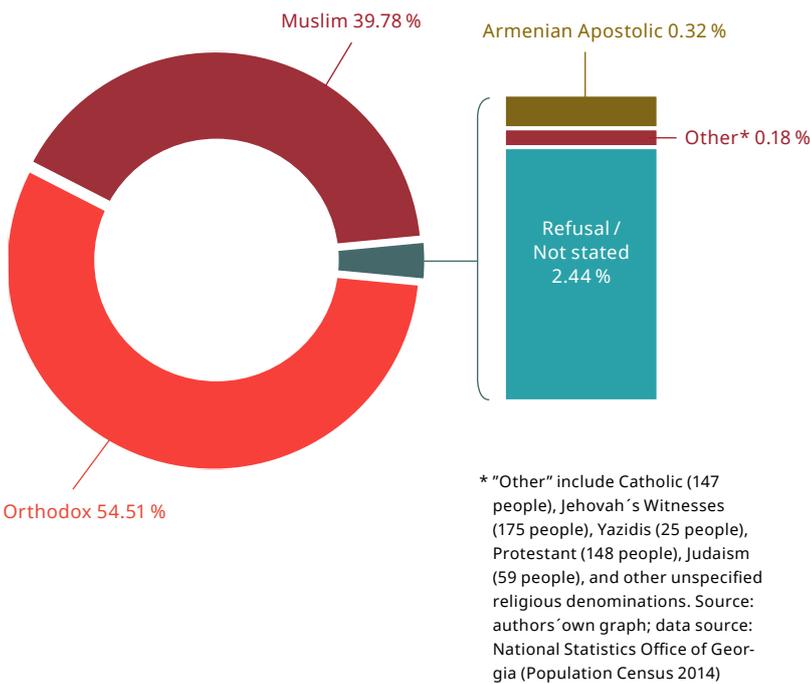
22 Pelkmans, *Defending the Border*.

FIGURE 4
Religious composition of Georgia



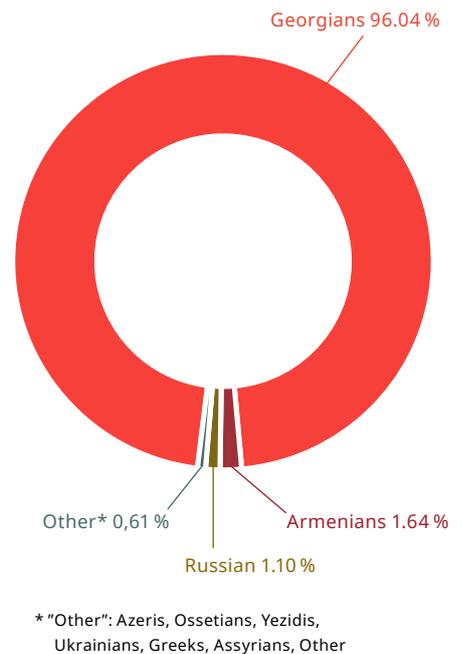
Source: Authors' own graph; data source: National Statistics Office of Georgia (Population Census 2014)

FIGURE 5
Religious composition of Adjara



Source: Authors' own graph; data source: National Statistics Office of Georgia (Population Census 2014)

FIGURE 6
Population of Adjara by region and ethnicity



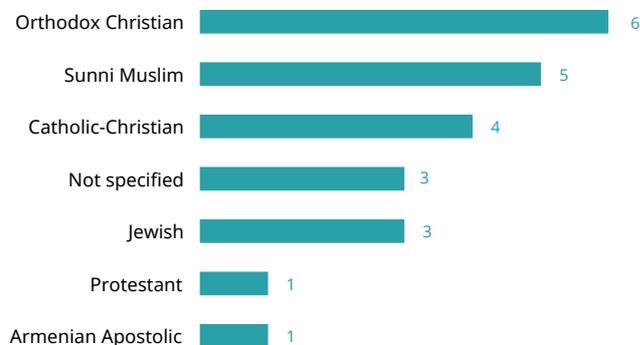
Source: authors' own graph; data source: National Statistics Office of Georgia (Population Census 2014)

FIGURE 7
Batumi's new promenade, March 2019



Source: Jens Liebchen

FIGURE 8
Religious affiliation of persons interviewed



Source Own data 2018

Over the last ten years, Batumi has experienced a massive infrastructural renewal and construction boom that have greatly transformed the city's skyline. Beyond Batumi's physical extension along the Black Sea coast (► **FIGURE 7**), five-star hotels, casinos, and high-rise apartment buildings have mushroomed in the city, highlighting the government's lofty aspirations. The infrastructural renewal was part of a comprehensive liberalisation policy during the 2004–13 presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili, which labelled Batumi a 'miracle' and 'the Las Vegas of the Black Sea'.²³

This liberalisation increased foreign direct investment in Adjara, especially from Turkey and the United States, and later from Russia. Batumi became attractive for several investors and tourists, mostly from Turkey, Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Iran, as well as for migrants from rural areas of Adjara. These developments strengthened religious competition for Batumi's limited physical space and tightened the political and social constraints over its use. A significant challenge facing religious communities is the struggle for a public presence in the city centre; specific hurdles include the procedure to get a permit to build a new place of worship and controversial processes for repurposing historical religious buildings. ► **FIGURE 8**

23 Tamta Khalvashi, 'Capturing Marginality: The Social Role of Photography in the Wake of Rapid Urban Development in Georgia', *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 66 (2014): 10 – 14.

FIGURE 9
Access to religious education according to religious organisation

	Orthodox Christians	Sunni Muslims	Protestants	Catholic Christians	Judaism	Armenian-Apostolic
formal religious education	six educational institutions in Batumi	none	none	none	none	none
informal religious education (strategies)	none	boarding houses (associated with Turkey or other Islamic states)/ educational meetings at the mosque	educational meetings at the church; online classes and educational centres near the church	informal training by padres among the religious community members	educational camps for young Jewish people (in Batumi, Bakuriani and Gudauri); synagogue as a Beth Midrash – the centre of religious education	not discussed
religious education abroad (religious leader)	not discussed	Turkey or other Islamic countries	not discussed	Kazakhstan	not discussed	Etchmiadzin (Armenia)

Source: own data 2018

Access to religious education

Interview analysis reveals unequal access to religious education for religious ‘others’ in Adjara. ► **FIGURE 9** This is a challenge in terms not only of educating communities but also of training religious leaders. The challenge is intensified by discrimination against religious minorities in schools, including incidents related to the promotion of Orthodox Christian theology in general religion classes. Despite a ban on proselytising, the Orthodox clergy interferes in these classes by displaying icons and other religious symbols.²⁴

In Batumi, there are significant differences in access to formal religious education. While members of the Orthodox community can receive formal education in the city, the religious education of other communities is marginalised and informal.

In one case in 2018, a Muslim boarding school in Kobuleti, near Batumi, was closed after officials ignored a ruling by the Batumi City Court that the school must be provided with sewerage and water connections.²⁵ In Batumi itself, the city administration refused permission to build a madrasa near the mufti’s office. In the words of one Sunni Muslim religious expert:

„ In Batumi, Muslims have no madrasa . . . Near the mufti’s office is a red building, which the government gave us; we were going to open a

The interview analysis reveals unequal access to religious education.

²⁴ ‘2019 Report’, U.S. Embassy in Georgia.

²⁵ Ibid.

madrasa. They gave that building to the mufti's office five years ago, but they still have not given us permission to open a madrasa here.²⁶

Because of the lack of religious education centres in Adjara and across Georgia, marginalised religious groups have developed two main strategies for receiving religious education. One strategy is based on religious education abroad. According to two Sunni Muslim experts:

- „ As for religious education, nothing changed after the Soviet period. We do not have a space where we can prepare imams, so they go abroad for religious education.²⁷
- „ Educational problems are one of the primary obstacles for Batumi's religious communities. It would be perfect if Georgia's Muslims had universities or colleges where people from our community could get an Islamic theological education. No one would go to study in Islamic countries if they had the opportunity to study in their homeland. They would grow up with a Georgian mentality and their national history, and receive a religious education at the same time. Unfortunately, our country does not have any educational programmes for Muslims.²⁸

Other, smaller religious groups have also developed strong international ties for higher theological education. The Armenian Apostolic Church, for example, continues to train its religious leaders in Armenia. The religion's only educational centre is in the Armenian city of Ejmiatsin, and if someone wants to become a theologian or priest, they need to go there.²⁹

As for Catholics, although there are teaching courses for deacons in Georgia in Tserovani, Tbilisi, and Kutaisi, the community has strong ties to Kazakhstan when it comes to religious education. Anyone who wants to become a padre cannot gain a suitable religious education in Georgia and must go instead to Kazakhstan.³⁰

The second strategy adopted by marginalised religious groups comprises informal forms of religious teaching. Protestants, for example, report that they use online courses and have established small, unauthorised training centres near churches.³¹ Various religious communities organise religious discussion groups in private spaces, apartments, or hotels.

Informal religious education and strong transnational ties for the purpose of higher theological education therefore compensate for the incomplete religious infrastructure available to minorities in Adjara. The issue of limited access to religious education for minorities plays an important role in self-perceptions of feeling disadvantaged.

The two main strategies for religious education are training abroad and informal forms of teaching.

26 Author interview with a Sunni Muslim religious expert, 22 November 2018.

27 Interview with a Sunni Muslim religious expert, 26 November 2018.

28 Interview with a Sunni Muslim secular expert, 25 December 2018.

29 Interview with an Armenian Apostolic religious expert, 25 November 2018.

30 Interview with a Catholic religious leader, December 2018.

31 Interview with a Protestant secular expert, 27 December 2018.

Contested sites of worship

Negotiation and contestation of religious sites and places of worship dominate self-perceptions among a significant number of religious minorities. Interviewees highlighted various topics with regard to faith-based negotiation processes in Batumi. Restoration, renovation, or destruction within a political narrative appeared in fifteen of the twenty-three interviews. Religious sites are subject to a perpetual process of change and are closely linked to shifts in political power. Twelve interviewees mentioned appropriation, transfer, and displacement processes in the city, as well as the legacy of the Soviet Union, when it comes to the use of religious sites. Closely linked to these dynamics are expropriations and the resultant lack of appropriate religious sites for various religious communities. Ten interviewees said the lack of suitable religious sites was a major problem for their communities.

Religious minorities emphasised that the Orthodox Church was a major beneficiary and powerful actor with strong ties to the Georgian state. As a result, the Orthodox Church is seen as an influential factor in the region, and it plays a decisive role in identifying the historical owners of disputed religious places.

Based on these trends, a four-way matrix can help categorise the status religious places in Batumi and their relations with the state authorities—specifically, the city administration. ► **FIGURE 10** ‘Religious places’ in this context are venues where people gather in person to express their religiosity. These places are closely linked to their respective religious communities and express the current dynamics of relations between minorities and the state at the city level. Accordingly, places of worship can be classified as either contested or less contested, while the behaviour of the state authorities, as represented by the municipality, towards religious communities can

FIGURE 10
Matrix of religious places and their relations with authorities



Source: ZOIS, Sina Gieseemann

The religious places express the current dynamics of relations between minorities and the state at the city level.

be characterised as either supportive or unsupportive. In this way, the matrix can throw light on certain conditions for the contestation of religious places. The components do not represent the quality of the relationships, but rather the presence or absence—and intensity—of contestation.

First, the proposed Ahali Mosque (New Mosque) in Batumi is the most contested site in the city, and the Georgian state's behaviour towards the Muslim community can be described as unsupportive. A new mosque is needed because the community's existing place of worship is not sufficient for the number of worshippers. Yet, the community has faced strong resistance to the construction of the mosque, including the refusal of the city authorities to grant planning permission for the building. Batumi's Muslims perceive this refusal as a case of pervasive discrimination against Muslims in Georgia. The Ahali Mosque is discussed in more detail in the following section.

Second, the Cathedral of the Mother of God in central Batumi can be also classified as contested. However, this religious place is the site of an invisible conflict between the state authorities and the Orthodox Church, on the one hand, and the Catholic community, on the other. In contrast to the visible conflict over the proposed Ahali Mosque, there is an invisible tension between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches about the historical right to own the Mother of God Cathedral, which has been appropriated by the Orthodox Church. Officially, the position of the Georgian state towards the Catholic community can still be described as supportive with regard to the legal and institutional environment. After the cathedral was repurposed in favour of the Orthodox community, the city administration under Saakashvili relocated the Catholic church to another urban district, and the municipality gave permission for a new Catholic building.

Third, the Armenian Apostolic Church in Batumi is less contested, while the behaviour of the Georgian state is unsupportive of the Armenian community. The Armenian community in Batumi has sufficient space for its religious life. Yet, the community argues that the city authorities have not given it permission to construct an annex for its priests. As a minority religious group, the Armenian community has experienced inequality in getting permission to build a religious site.

Fourth, the synagogue in Batumi also ranks as less contested. The Jewish community has experienced no inequality in terms of accessing property or land or obtaining permits to build or restore religious sites. Jews have a long history of living in Georgia, which is one of the few countries without a history of anti-Semitism. Two independent Jewish communities are established in Adjara: Georgian and Ashkenazi Jews. Freedom House stated in 2009 that Jews' religious freedom was respected in Georgia. The research for this report can confirm the supportive behaviour of the Georgian state towards the Jewish community in 2019: interviewees of that community perceived themselves to be well integrated into every sphere of Georgian social life. However, one should keep in mind the very low number of Jews in Batumi—and in Georgia generally—due to the mass emigration of Georgian Jews to Israel, the United States, Russia, and Europe.

These four modes of relations show variation in self-perceptions and reveal that questions of the construction, rebuilding, and appropriation of public places of worship have become central to the political and symbolic

contestation between the alliance of the state and the Orthodox Church, on the one hand, and minority confessions, on the other.

The Ahali Mosque: the most controversial site

There is only one historical Georgian mosque in central Batumi, called Orta Came (► FIGURES 11 + 12). Built in 1863, it is too small for a growing number of worshippers. In 2014, Bidzina Ivanishvili, then the de facto leader of Georgia's government, promised to support the Muslim community in the construction of a second mosque in the city, to be known as the Ahali Mosque. This created a great sense of expectation among Batumi's Muslims.

Shortly afterwards, the government in Tbilisi took back its promise under pressure from the Orthodox Church, nationalist right-wing parties, and influential members of Batumi's intelligentsia. After multiple requests for permission to build the new mosque and the refusal of Batumi's City Hall to grant it, the dispute remains unresolved. The mayor's office argued that the location of the new mosque was not suitable for a religious site as it was in a high-density residential zone. However, there are five Orthodox churches in the same area. The City Hall, backed by the Orthodox Church, has tried to obstruct the process.

This unresolved and unstable situation has resulted in the growing engagement and mobilisation of believers. They have developed various strategies and tactics in their struggle for what they see as their right to the city. This public activism illustrates that the process of constructing a new mosque in Batumi is not merely one of physical place-making. Batumi is also an arena for religious competition and public struggle—and a space in which

The dispute about the mosque remains unresolved.

FIGURE 11
Orta Came, March 2019



Source: Jens Liebchen

FIGURE 12
Orta Came, March 2019



Source: Tsypylma Darieva

marginalised populations can make themselves visible. Against the hegemonic position of the Orthodox Church, Georgian Muslims have mobilised their community in three manifestations of grass-roots religious activism: collective prayer on the street, a new level of self-organisation, and cooperation with secular and international organisations.

Collective prayer on the street

Public prayer outside the Orta Came mosque is a regular practice among Batumi's Muslims. It is an act that contests the government's refusal to allow the building of a new place of worship. Slogans such as 'Help build a new mosque!' and 'Enough praying on the streets!' can be heard in the Batumi's historical mosque at every Friday prayer.

Each week, over 3,000 worshippers attend Orta Came and a temporary mosque on the site of the proposed Ahali Mosque. In front of the building are banners and signs that read 'Ahali Mosque' in Georgian and English. Targeted at non-Muslim and non-Georgian visitors, a large poster showing the modernist design of the new mosque hangs in the courtyard of the temporary Ahali Mosque. The mobilisation of Batumi's Muslims in claiming the city as their own by praying outside is a specific way of raising awareness of their presence and can be seen as a type of street protest against being subjugated as 'other' Georgians.

A new level of self-organisation

In June 2016, local Muslims established the Foundation for Erecting a New Mosque in Batumi. Since then, thanks to the foundation's fundraising efforts, members of the Muslim community purchased a plot of land for the Ahali Mosque. Within this level of self-organisation, Muslim activists collected 12,000 signatures and submitted a request to the local and central governments asking for a piece of land on which to build a new mosque. Community members put up a fence around the site of the future mosque in Abashidze Street, built a temporary wooden construction, and had a sewerage system and water pipes connected. ► **FIGURE 13**

Initiated by the foundation and the Georgian Muslim Union, a modest temporary construction for the future mosque was symbolically inaugurated on 26 May 2017, Georgia's independence day. In the words of Taniel Nakaidze, the chairman of the Georgian Muslim Union:

„26 May was also a Friday, so we used the perfect coincidence and opened the new mosque on Jummah day [the Muslim day of collective prayer] and the country's national holiday at the same time.³²

According to the foundation, the future mosque should be not only a prayer house for believers but also a cultural centre for conferences and educational and cultural activities as well as a social venue for locals and tourists of all backgrounds.³³

³² Author interview, Batumi, March 2019.

³³ Author interview with a representative of the Foundation for Erecting a New Mosque in Batumi, 15 December 2018.

FIGURE 13

The proposed Ahali Mosque, March 2019

Source: Tsypylma Darieva

Cooperation with secular and international organisations

Over the last decade, there has emerged a new solidarity with non-religious external actors that empower Adjara's stigmatised Georgian Muslims. Through a range of far-reaching activities, Muslim activists have produced a new sense of agency and fostered not only a religious but also a civic identity. Batumi's Muslim activists are supported by a set of actors outside the religious community: Georgian non-governmental organisations like the Human Rights Education and Monitoring Centre (EMC)³⁴ and the Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI) as well as international organisations such as the United States Agency for International Development.

Muslim activists have fostered not only a religious but also a civic identity.

According to Tamta Mikeladze, a member of the EMC, the main role of the non-governmental organisations was as follows:

³⁴ The EMC works on human rights causes and aims to support the creation of a free and equal society based on solidarity.

„ We have been supporting the Muslim community mainly with legal and rights-related support, legal counselling (for example, in purchasing a plot of land), representing their interests in court, meeting with representatives, and supporting them with legal advocacy.³⁵

Controversial debates about the construction of places of worship reinforced religious competition on the ground that can escalate into intolerance of religious minorities. In the case of Batumi’s Muslims, this competition motivated the community to adopt civic strategies in the fight for their rights to the city.

The Batumi Cathedral of the Mother of God: an invisible conflict

A less visible pattern of contestation can be observed between the Orthodox Church and Catholic Christians. The Batumi Cathedral of the Mother of God (► FIGURE 14) was built between 1898 and 1902 as a Roman Catholic Church through the sponsorship of powerful Catholic Georgian businessmen, the Zubalashvili brothers.

During the Soviet period, the cathedral was closed, deconsecrated, and repurposed as a high-voltage laboratory. In 1989, with the beginning of nationalist politics in Georgia, the building was transferred to the Orthodox Church. Because of this transfer, Batumi’s Catholic community continues to

FIGURE 14
Batumi Cathedral of the Mother of God, May 2018



Source: Tsypylma Darieva

35 Interview conducted by Giorgi Tadumadze, a research assistant, in November 2019.

view the church as a ‘deprived cathedral’.³⁶ The Catholic community cites the building’s typical Gothic architecture as evidence of the community’s cultural heritage and its right to this religious site. Indeed, the cathedral’s architecture is not reminiscent of the Georgian Orthodox architectural tradition.

The tensions between the two religious groups are heightened by the allegation that the Orthodox Church is destroying Catholic heritage by letting the building fall apart. In the words of one Catholic religious expert:

„ Everyone needs their own property, and we need ours too. Nobody pays attention to the interior of the old cathedral. The frescoes are damaged, water is leaking from the dome, [the Orthodox Church] is deliberately not repairing the temple, they want to remove any evidence of Catholic heritage.³⁷

At the same time, the Catholic community reports experiences of exclusion and hostility from the Orthodox community:

„ I went inside the cathedral several months ago. I made the sign of the cross in the Catholic tradition. When the Orthodox parishioners noticed that, they approached me and called me Satan and ordered me to leave the temple. There was another case when Catholic students arrived from [the Georgian city of] Akhaltsikhe and wanted to go inside the cathedral, but Orthodox worshippers did not let them in. It does not have to be so; it is unfortunate when Catholic heritage does not belong to its legal heirs.³⁸

Despite the injustice perceived by Batumi’s Catholic community and occasional protests against the continued possession of the cathedral, the conflict receives little public attention. According to one Catholic religious leader, ‘four governments have changed since Georgia’s independence but none of them had a readiness to speak about the deprived cathedral’.³⁹ Nor does the responsible authority, the Department of Cultural Heritage, take any action to preserve the cultural heritage of the Catholic community.

According to Catholics, the reason for this situation is the small size of their community in Batumi. The division between the religious majority and minority is an important factor in ongoing negotiation processes in the city. Like the Catholic community, the Orthodox community cites the number of its followers and the scale of its influence on political processes when justifying its right to occupy religious spaces in Batumi. According to one secular expert:

„ The government would not let non-dominant groups have a cultural centre in the main part of Batumi, and this is why they constructed a new Catholic church near the port.⁴⁰

36 Author interview with a Catholic religious leader, 25 November 2018.

37 Interview with a Catholic religious expert, Batumi, November 2018.

38 Interview with a Catholic religious leader, Batumi, November 2018.

39 Interview with a Catholic religious leader, 25 November 2018.

40 Interview with a secular expert, 21 November 2018.

FIGURE 15
Church of the Holy Spirit, March 2019



Source: Jens Liebchen

In 1999, the Catholic Church received a new, modernist place of worship, the Church of the Holy Spirit (► FIGURE 15), thanks to the support of Adjara's then leader, Aslan Abashidze. But the Catholic community continues to regard the Cathedral of the Mother of God as its cultural heritage. The new Catholic building is located in a peripheral, disadvantaged urban zone, close to a main road and surrounded by a minivan taxi rank. Tensions between the Orthodox and Catholic communities over the cathedral show that controversial debates in Batumi take place not only on a visible level involving Georgian Muslims but also in a less visible manner by shaping the city's uneasy accommodation of religious diversity.

Conclusion

Dynamic processes of inter-religious contestation and growing religious competition raise the question of whether urban environments allow or hinder visible religious pluralisation in Georgia. While national laws and the state's recent policy towards faith claim to be sources of religious regulation and tolerance of diversity, cities have their own modes of on-the-ground regulation that privilege distinct religious groups in public spaces.

Religious competition can take different forms. Conflicting approaches to a given site can remain latent or hidden or can escalate into visible confrontation. At that stage, there is only a limited possibility for visible religious plurality in urban spaces that are dominated by the Georgian Orthodox Church. Moreover, the close connection between the Orthodox community and the political sphere is evident. The Orthodox Church is a privileged religious community and a political player in Georgia, while non-dominant religious groups are often sidelined by state institutions and city administrations.

As for religious places, the intensity of contestation in these sites depends on the level of support from the state and on the role of the Orthodox Church. Systematically ignoring the demands of religious minorities for recognition of their rights creates a gap between the national policy of tolerance and bottom-up practices that can increase the potential for conflict in the region. The main findings of this report relate to the specific context of Adjara, but they may also be relevant for other regions of multi-religious Georgia that have been shaped by post-socialist uncertainty, globalisation, and inter-ethnic tensions.

The geopolitical location of Adjara's capital, Batumi, on the border between Georgia and Turkey significantly determines the current uneasy negotiations over religious plurality in the city. Ownership of territory, control over places of worship, and access to religious education are crucial in the analysis of the ways in which religious minorities are accommodated. Members of these minorities seek to participate in urban structures as recognised citizens; however, a lack of clear legal frameworks for the operation of religious diversity means that the management, protection, and regulation of claims over Georgia's sacred sites are not yet fixed.

The urban context plays an important role as a space and framework for the mobilisation of both silent contestation and voiced protest by religious

Batumi's geopolitical location significantly determines the current uneasy negotiations over religious plurality.

minorities. The main actors in this context are not only city administrations but also civil society representatives. The urban environment may emancipate marginalised actors and reveal new identity configurations that challenge the dominant concept of a singular religious and national identity. The role of faith-based non-governmental civic activism in Georgia is part of a broader democratic and social movement that may lead to a relaxation of conservative, traditionalist views of revived religious organisations. That, in turn, may generate a new understanding of what it means to be both Georgian and non-Orthodox.

Imprint

Author

Tsypylma Darieva

Published by

© Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) gGmbH

Address

Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) gGmbH
Mohrenstraße 60
10117 Berlin
info@zois-berlin.de
www.zois-berlin.de

Citation

Tsypylma Darieva “Faith, state, and religious competition in Georgia”, ZOiS Report 1/2021, (https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/ZOiS_Reports/ZOiS_Report_1_2021.pdf)

ISSN 2627-7233

Layout

Yuko Stier

This report is licensed under a **CC BY-NC 4.0** license.

