

Religious Challenges in the Georgian Socio-Political Environment

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Abstract: *This study aims to determine which factors drive religious conflict between Georgian Muslims and Orthodox Christians: dogmatic and value differences between the religions or the fear of the dominant religious group that the public performance of religious rituals by the minority will lead to the loss of their dominant position and privileges? The study also aims to analyze the effectiveness of the state's response in the conflict resolution process. The study is based on a qualitative method, namely 'case study'. The work purposefully selects and studies the high-profile religious conflicts in modern Georgia in 2010-2013, in particular those that occurred in the village of Nigvziani, the city of Kobuleti, and the village of Chela between the local Georgian Muslim and Orthodox populations. The study showed that state policy is less focused on resolving religious conflicts at the root and is primarily focused on appeasement rather than in-depth resolution. As a result, the study revealed that state institutions are less able to serve as a neutral "arbitrator" in the regulation of religious conflicts. Despite the adoption of numerous laws, decisions, and regulations by the state at the legislative, formalized level, unresolved or difficult-to-resolve issues persist in practice, hindering mutual acceptance and the perception among ethnically Georgian people of different faiths of themselves as one society. Finally, the research process confirms that the concept of the modern Georgian nation was to some extent based on Orthodox identity, leaving people of other faiths outside the Georgian national identity, and, most of all, the ethnically Georgian but religiously Muslim population.*

Keywords: *Orthodox Georgians, Muslim Georgians, Ethnicity, Challenges, State Role.*

Introduction

In the modern world, one of the most fundamental human rights is freedom of religion – a right without which it is inconceivable for a democratic state to exist. Georgia is a di-

verse country in terms of ethnicity, culture, and religion. Here, people of different faiths have lived and coexisted peacefully side by side for centuries. In modern Georgia, secularism and complete freedom of belief and religion are legally established by the

Georgian Constitution. In particular, “it is inadmissible to persecute a person because of his or her faith, religion or conscience, as well as to force him or her to express his or her views on them”¹. Also, under the Association Agreement with the European Union, as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights, the Georgian state has undertaken the responsibility to take adequate measures to ensure religious freedom, including through effective investigation of cases of restrictions on religious freedom and punishment of perpetrators. Despite this, there are still challenges regarding religious tolerance and acceptance of diversity. That is why it is important to determine to what extent the state fulfills its obligations. In this paper, we examine religiously motivated conflicts in several regions of Georgia: namely, the village of Nigvziani, the city of Kobuleti, and the village of Chela. The selection of these cases was based on the fact that, in all three cases, religious confrontation occurred between followers of different confessions within the same ethnic group, Georgians. It is noteworthy that, despite Georgia being an ethnically quite diverse country, which in itself determines religious diversity, religious-based disagreements mainly occur between one dominant ethnic group - Georgians. Our goal in this study is, on the one hand, to investigate the specific factors driving religious conflicts between Muslim and

Orthodox Georgians and, on the other hand, to examine the extent to which the state can resolve these conflicts.

Theoretical aspects and research methodology

Georgia, as we have already mentioned, is a multi-ethnic country from an ethno-confessional perspective. One of its tasks is to create a public space where people of different religions and ethnic backgrounds will feel loyalty to the state². This loyalty largely depends on the existence of intergroup loyalty. Suppose such loyalty and mutual acceptance are not created between the dominant Orthodox Georgians and representatives of other faiths and/or ethnic groups. In that case, it will also be challenging to establish a loyal attitude towards the state. In conditions of reduced loyalty in intergroup relations, state institutions should be strong and, even more, there must be a political will on the part of the state to act as a neutral arbiter and not be seen as a vehicle for the interests of the dominant group. In the current reality, implementing this practice is not very common. There are numerous studies in Western scientific literature on the formation of intergroup relations in multi-member societies, the process of nation-building, and the role of religion and ethnicity in this process. Anthony Smith³, one of the prominent representatives of ethnosymbolism, considers religion an important factor in the “myth-symbol” complex

of the historical past, a determinant of nations' modern identity. According to Anthony Smith's definition of ethnicity, "*The sacred territory, holy cities, and ancestral religion are often embedded in the ethnic conception and preserved in the national one*"⁴. Arnold Toynbee also emphasizes the role of religion as a constructive factor in identity. According to his theory of civilizations, religion is one of the main markers of cultural unity and local civilization, identity⁵. Toynbee when speaking of religion as one of the constructive factors, does not mean religion in a dogmatic sense, but rather a system that constructs a nation from a socio-cultural perspective. John Armstrong also emphasizes the stability and importance of religious symbols and believes that this remarkable stability is reflected in their role in maintaining ethnic continuity⁶. Ernest Gellner's views⁷ On nationalism and the origin of nations differ, as he develops a modernist theory of the nation. According to this theory, nationalism arises from the demands of modernization, in which the state seeks to standardize culture. However, even in this case, if we consider Christianity as one of the most important aspects of culture, we can easily see that, in the political discourse on building the modern Georgian state, the standardization of this culture was primarily based on Christian symbolism⁸. Unlike Gellner, Barth⁹ does not attach importance to cultural commonality for ethnic unity. According to his theory, the main

thing is not a common culture, but the boundary by which "us" and "them" are separated from each other. National identity often takes on religious identity structures¹⁰, or, at the very least, national identity itself may be of religious origin¹¹, and it can also become a powerful form of social organization¹². Alternatively, in extreme cases, it may take the form of religious nationalism and serve as the basis for national unity¹³.

Research Methodology

This study is a case study and uses a qualitative research method. At the first stage, both foreign and Georgian-language scientific literature was studied about the relationship between religion and politics, religious diversity, and Georgia's current and past experience in this regard. In the next stage of the research, we analyzed the country's existing legislative-level normative acts on religious tolerance: the Constitution of Georgia, Georgian legislation, and government decrees. In the third stage, we conducted a content analysis of news articles from various news agencies and interviews. Specifically, 35 articles, 13 interviews, and 32 information blogs were analyzed about the cases under study. The studied materials were published in the most popular Georgian online publications and agencies, such as Radio Liberty, Netgazeti, Publica, Tabula, and GHN. We conducted the research from the perspective of studying spe-

cific cases, which means analyzing specific events - religious conflicts – and examining the interdependence among the groups involved. In addition, to answer the research questions, we use another qualitative research technique – an expert survey. As part of the research, eight in-depth interviews were conducted with experts on the relationship between religion and politics, representatives of the Agency for Religious Affairs, a conflictologist, and lawyers from the Institute for Tolerance and Diversity. For the expert survey, we used purposive, nonprobability sampling, selecting respondents based on their qualifications and experience. The selected political scientists and conflict analysts have experience studying these religious conflicts. At the same time, representatives of the State Agency for Religious Affairs and lawyers from the Institute for Tolerance and Diversity were involved in regulating and resolving them. The interviews were conducted during the period 2021 September–2022 February.

The study has certain limitations. In particular, it covers only those high-profile religious conflicts that have occurred in modern Georgia, about which court rulings and public defender's reports already exist, which allowed us to study the role of the state in the conflict management process; therefore, the study does not cover ongoing or unreported religious conflicts. Also, the study does not include ethnically motivated conflicts, which may have had a reli-

gious character, but the main reason for the conflict was ethnic, not religious affiliation. As a limitation, we note that the study includes only conflicts among ethnic Georgians on religious grounds.

The Question of Georgian Muslims: A Brief Historical Retrospective

As mentioned earlier, the coexistence of representatives of different religions side by side has never been foreign to Georgian history. It was also the case in the nineteenth century, when Georgia ceased to exist as an independent political entity and was annexed by the Tsarist Russian Empire. Although the official policy of Tsarist Russia prioritized Orthodoxy, in practice, this priority applied only to Russian Orthodoxy. Nevertheless, based on centuries-old traditions of ethnic and religious tolerance and coexistence, it remained commonplace in Georgian society. Especially in Tbilisi, the country's capital, and other large urban areas, Orthodox Georgians, Armenians, Jews, Greeks, and Muslims participated together in public and economic life, engaged in trade and cultural exchange, and lived side by side in the same public spaces. A clear example of all this is the presence of cult buildings of various denominations – Orthodox churches, a synagogue, a mosque, and a Georgian cathedral – operating side by side on one of Tbilisi's main streets, Kote Abkhazi Street. However, the same cannot be

said about relations with ethnically Georgian, but religiously Muslim Georgians. According to the 2014 census, the Muslim population in Georgia is 398,677, of whom 132,852 – mostly ethnic Georgian Muslims – live in the territory of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara, along the Black Sea coast in southwestern Georgia¹⁴. The Islamization of the Adjara population dates back to the 16th century, when the territory became part of the Ottoman Empire following its conquest. Over time, the Christian Adjarians (Georgians) under the Ottoman Empire were forced to renounce Orthodoxy and convert to Islam under pressure. The reunification of Adjara with Georgia occurred only in the 19th century, following Russia's victory in the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-1878, the Treaty of San Stefano, and the Congress of Berlin. However, taking drastic steps to integrate the Adjara population with the Georgian population was not in the interests of Tsarist Russia - Adjara became part of the Russian Empire, not Georgia (since the latter was already part of the Russian Empire). Such was the idea of the Tsarist imperial policy. Part of this policy was that the Russian government considered the Adjarian Georgians not Georgians, but 'Tatars', which means Muslims¹⁵. Moreover, they were considered politically unreliable because they lived in Ottoman border regions and might be carriers of Ottoman influence.

Throughout Georgia's centuries-old history, Orthodoxy has been the

most important marker that defined being Georgian. One of the main goals of all historical conquerors was to fight against Orthodoxy. During various wars of conquest and invasions, the destruction and burning of churches, the killing of clergy, and the forcing of conquered and defeated populations to reject Orthodoxy and convert to Islam were important steps towards this goal. Accordingly, it is logical that Orthodoxy has become the most important determining factor of Georgian identity. Given these historical experiences, it is probably not difficult to understand why Georgian society found it difficult to accept and perceive as "one of its own" the ethnically Georgian, Georgian-speaking (Georgian remained the language of communication throughout the reunified territory of Adjara) but religiously non-Orthodox Muslims.

On the other hand, the "Muslim" Georgians were also less accepting of Christian Georgians, the 'Gurjs'. In this regard, the Ottoman Empire did not lack any attempts over the centuries. This problem was well understood by Georgian thinkers of the second half of the nineteenth century; they did not lack efforts in this direction and did everything within their power to promote the integration of Georgian Muslims. On the one hand, they should raise awareness in this direction among the Georgian population. On the other hand, they aimed to spread Georgian literacy among the predominantly Muslim population.

The defining postulate of being Georgian, precisely considering the history of Georgia, was formulated by the famous Georgian writer and public figure, recognized as the father of the nation, Ilia Chavchavadze back in 1863 in the following way: "Whoever seeks the good of the nation must love its language, its homeland, and its faith, for in the unity of these three lies its soul and life."¹⁶ Although the reunion with Adjara caused great excitement in Georgian society, the establishment of the perception of Muslim Georgians as ethnic Georgians and not as "Turks" remained a significant problem¹⁷. This reality led to a gradual change in the three hypostases proposed by Chavchavadze: in the letters published since 1977, "faith" is replaced by the 'spirit of unity. Moreover, in 1895, he directly emphasizes that the main condition for the nation's survival is unity: "Language and homeland are dead without unity, but unity is the soul and life of the nation"¹⁸. What could have been the reason for such a transformation? It is clear that the replacement of faith within the triad—homeland, language, and religion—began precisely when the territory of Adjara was returned to Georgia and, accordingly, the integration of Muslim Georgians into Georgian society became necessary to recognize them as "ours".

"Well, Georgians, you know how to show yourself to your newly joined brothers! Now you know how to prove to the country the will of your fathers: "A brother is for a brother,

for a black day." Now it will become clear whether this will be an empty word or a full deed for you"¹⁹.

Georgian public figures made significant efforts towards this "full deed" in the 19th century. Georgian enlighteners actively sought to lay the groundwork for unity between Georgian Orthodox Christians and Adjarian Muslims. Georgian newspapers of that period often published the history of the Georgians of Adjara, emphasizing this region as a historical part of Georgia. Freedom of religion is a natural human right, and forced conversion from one religion to another restricts this right. In addition to the distrust among Orthodox Georgians, as mentioned above, the matter was further complicated by the fact that, although Muslim Georgians spoke Georgian and preserved Georgian traditions, folklore, and the institution of the family, they also had little trust in Christian Georgians. The spread of education and cultural integration was considered the only and most important way to restore national unity by 19th-century Georgian educators. In this regard, the contribution of Zakaria Chichinadze is particularly noteworthy, as he was among the first to promote the dissemination of Georgian books and literature among Georgians. The teaching of the history of Georgia (as a homeland) and the Georgian language was considered by Z. Chichinadze to be the most important work aimed at "awakening the dormant national feelings" among Georgian

Muslims²⁰. To achieve this goal, Z. Chichinadze traveled to Adjara for about 10 years, distributing Georgian-language books with his own funds. Many Muslim Georgians learned to read and write Georgian thanks to him. However, the overall background of relations between Muslim and Christian Georgians remained unfavorable. It is confirmed by the fact that in the 20th century, during the period of Georgia's independence (1918-1921), in 1920, a member of the Social Democratic Party, Petre Geleishvili, was sent to Atjara specifically to study the situation of the "Makhmadian Georgians" (the same as "Muslim Georgians") and to formulate recommendations. The fact that the Constituent Assembly of Georgia sent a special representative on a similar mission during the drafting of the Constitution is a strong indication of the issue's relevance. "They hate us... Unfortunately, we have not done anything that would, if not eradicate this feeling of hatred from the hearts of the people, at least change the attitude of such people towards us²¹" wrote P. Geleishvili to the government of independent Georgia. At a formal level, the 1921 Georgian Constitution relegated ethno-cultural and religious differences among the population to the background (Adjara was also granted autonomous status). Religious rights were also enshrined, but this was not implemented in practice. The independent Republic of Georgia lasted only three years and ended on February 1921, due to Bolshevik an-

nexation²². As a result of Sovietization, a new stage in Georgia's nation-building emerged. Soviet nationalism, which was based on a primordialist understanding of the nation, created the practice of titular nations and, accordingly, the extreme polarization of ethnicity. It is also interesting that the Soviet Union was officially based on an atheistic ideology. In reality, this was the state's control of spiritual independence. In the early stages of the Soviet period, the result of this policy was the massive demolition of churches, their destruction, a change of function, and the persecution of clergy with particular cruelty. The goal of the Soviet project was one: the formation of Homo Sovieticus, and religion was not a field of interest in this process. Accordingly, the Soviet repressive policy, which, among other things, massively persecuted religious institutions (especially in the first stage of the Soviet era), paid no attention to the rapprochement of religious differences between the Muslims and Christians. It was not its goal. As Richard Sakva notes, the Soviet man was to be formed as a member of a supranational unity, and in this unity, there was no place for ethnic or even religious ties²³. Accordingly, the result of such 70-year politics was that during the Soviet period, there was practically no religious conflict between Orthodox Georgians and Muslim Georgians (as well as between representatives of other religions). However, this did not mean at all that the concept of religious difference, "ours and oth-

ers”, had disappeared somewhere. It soon became apparent after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Religious denominations and formalized institutional relations since 1990th

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and Georgia's independence (1991), Georgia, like other post-Soviet republics, faced many challenges. Chief among these challenges was the long-standing “tradition” of statelessness, which ultimately influenced all subsequent processes. The absence of state institutions, civil war, ethnic and territorial confrontation within the country (with Russian intervention and incitement), and the difficult economic and social background have pushed into the background such important issues as the protection of human rights, civic activism, urban development, and the determination of the political, social, and other rights of members of various religious groups as all the population of the country. Accordingly, the issue of religious tolerance, like many other important topics, was neither on the agenda nor could it be. One of the first and most significant steps in state-building was the adoption of Georgia's 1995 Constitution. Article 9 of the Constitution of Georgia stipulates that “the state proclaims complete freedom of belief and religion and declares the independence of the state and religious associations from each other”²⁴. Thus, in this article, the state clearly

establishes a secular model, implying that it is not affiliated with any particular religion and ensuring the equality of all religious communities. Considering the country's social and cultural realities and historical past, the 2002 Constitutional Agreement (concordat) between Georgia and the Georgian Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church can be considered an important institutional step towards establishing a legal framework. The Concordat was an attempt to formalize the relationship between the state and the Orthodox Church. This treaty recognized the special role of Orthodoxy and the Church in Georgia's history, reflected in the granting of special status to the Orthodox Church. However, at the same time, the document once again confirms the state's tolerant policy towards other religious denominations living in the country: “The state recognizes the special role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the history of the country, but ensures the freedom and equality of all other religious associations by law”²⁵.

An important step in regulating legal norms in the field of religion was the determination of the legal status of religious associations in 2011. In particular, following legislative amendments to the Civil Code enacted by the Parliament of Georgia, religious associations in Georgia were allowed to register as legal entities under public law (LEPLs). Until 2011, only Orthodox Christians had such a legal status, while other denominations (for example, Muslims,

Jehovah's Witnesses, Catholics, Gregorians, Jews) functioned as private organizations. This change was an important step towards legal guarantees of religious equality and tolerance. This reform was primarily assessed as a progressive step by various international organizations (the OSCE, Council of Europe, and Amnesty International). However, international organizations were also concerned about the law's shortcomings and the dangers it poses. One of the shortcomings is the excessively rapid pace of adoption of the changes. For example, the law in question was adopted in five days following three hearings and 'excludes the possibility of participating in the religious communities, and especially the involvement of religious minorities in this process'²⁶. The fact that the Orthodox Church continues to enjoy a privileged legal and factual position under the amendments, for example, priority in the matter of property restitution, has been considered contrary to the principle of equality in terms of religious tolerance in general²⁷. Although implementing these changes creates a legal framework, it cannot eliminate the institutional inequalities between different confessions²⁸.

One of the shortcomings of Georgia's steps towards religious tolerance is that the state has never calculated the amount of damage caused to the Orthodox Church during the Soviet period, even though this topic has been repeatedly discussed on the agenda of both the government and

opposition parties. As a result, the church's funding practice is not based on compensation for damages, but on a direct subsidy model. This funding rule also applies to Muslim and Jewish communities, the Armenian Apostolic Church, and the Catholic Church. The practice of determining the amount of damage caused during the Soviet period is also not taken into account in this case. Among the problems noted is that, unlike the Orthodox Church, the state fully controls the purpose and spending of funding for four religious organizations, which poses a risk of interference with their autonomy²⁹.

The creation of the State Agency for Religious Affairs in 2014, whose goal is to promote dialogue between the state and religious communities and prevent conflicts, was also met with conflicting assessments. On the one hand, the stated goals of returning property lost as a result of repression of religious groups, developing state strategies on education and tolerance, and participating in dialogues between representatives of different religions in regions characterized by religious conflict can be considered positive; on the other hand, there are also concerns about several aspects of the newly created agency's mandate. In particular, the establishment of this institution was not preceded by consultations with the Council of Religions under the Public Defender and non-governmental organizations working on issues of religious freedom. The creation of a non-representative body on religious is-

sues, subordinate to the Prime Minister, also carries risks. This practice of creating a centralized state institution carries the risk of arbitrary state interference in the autonomy of religious communities³⁰.

An important step was taken to further strengthen the institutional framework for religious equality in 2021, when, at the initiative of the State Agency for Religious Issues of Georgia and with the support of international organizations OSCE/ODIHR, UNDP Georgia, and the Council of Europe's Tolerance and Diversity Program, an interfaith working group was established within the State Agency for Religious Issues. Moreover, since 2021, an interreligious working group has been operating with the agency, with a format more akin to a consultative platform between the state and religious communities.

In conclusion, since 1995, the Georgian state has established a legislative and institutional framework to ensure religious freedom and the principle of tolerance. Despite shortcomings in the legislation, the steps taken to establish a legal framework for religious equality can be assessed as a positive development. At the legal level, the rights of all religious groups are recognized and protected.

Case study: Overview of challenges

Nigvziani village incident. The village of Nigvziani is located in the Guria region. 35% of the population

consists of eco-migrants who settled from Atjara in the 1970s and again in the late 1980s, many of whom identify as “Georgian Muslims”³¹. During the Soviet period, religious differences did not become (at least openly) a cause of religious conflict (as we have already mentioned above, this was facilitated, on the one hand, by the mass repressions of the Soviet government at the initial stage, including the suppression of religious services, and on the other hand, by the established policy of atheism). After gaining independence, the peaceful coexistence of the Christian and Muslim populations continued for more than two decades. However, in 2010, a conflict between them on religious grounds took place for the first time. According to the Public Defender of Georgia, the conflict was sparked by the Muslims' desire to open a chapel. According to the local mufti, the district municipality again opposed the plan. It offered to organize transportation for Muslims to Kobuleti (a nearby city) instead of the mosque so that they could pray there. However, instead of a mosque, Muslims opened a public chapel in a private house where Georgian Muslims prayed every Friday. This controversy was not widely covered and, accordingly, did not cause a nationwide response. However, the conflict soon continued, and in 2012, on the holiday of Bayram, after the end of Friday prayers, 150 Christians blocked the road for Muslims and demanded the closure of the chapel³². Finally, as a result of meetings held

at the village council involving various institutions, the parties agreed that no new religious buildings would be built without permission, but that Muslims would be allowed to use their place of worship. As a result, the conflict was stabilized to some extent, and the Muslim population of Nigvziani was granted the right to pray.

The Kobuleti Incident. Another high-profile incident of conflict between Georgian Muslims and Christians occurred in Kobuleti. Kobuleti is the second largest city in the Adjara region, where the majority of the population (unlike the mountainous villages of Adjara) is Christian. In 2014, ethnic Georgian Orthodox Christians, the dominant religious group, protested the construction of a Muslim school in Kobuleti and hung a severed pig's head on the building's door. The aforementioned action elicited a strong response from Muslims living in Georgia and representatives of civil society. A case was opened under Article 151 of the Criminal Code, i.e., threats³³.

Regarding this incident, the Georgian Patriarchate issued a statement, according to which the incident in Kobuleti is a gross insult to the religious feelings of Muslim believers and such an act is unacceptable for both Christianity and any traditional religion. However, the Patriarchate representative also stated that the construction of an Islamic boarding school, whose religious purpose is beyond doubt, was carried out against the will of the absolute major-

ity of the population, which could not be morally justified. On the other hand, in the same statement, the Patriarchate assessed the action in question - hanging a pork roast on the door of a Muslim - as a provocation³⁴. At this stage, the mosque in Kobuleti is still not officially functioning.

The case of the Village of Chela.

Finally, the study included a conflict that occurred in the village of Chela, Chechla community, Adigeni municipality, Samtskhe-Javakheti region. The village of Chela is also mixed in terms of religion, with both the local Orthodox population and ecomigrants from Adjara living there. The confrontation between Orthodox and Muslim Georgians began in July 2013, when local Muslims installed a minaret next to a mosque. The local Muslim community believes that a minaret is a necessary attribute of a mosque. Followers of Islam believe that the construction of a minaret will not restrict the rights of Christian neighbors, because from this place neither the mullah will call the faithful to prayer, nor will anyone be disturbed by loudspeakers³⁵. However, the construction of this mosque was mainly carried out in violation of legal norms. "They had no intention of erecting the minaret and explained this by saying that they could not obtain such a permit, since there is no law that defines the rules for the construction of a mosque," says a representative of the Tolerance Center in an interview³⁶. In addition, as it turns out, the minaret was imported from

Turkey to Georgia. The Muslim residents of Chela explain this by saying that it would not have been possible to manufacture it in Georgia (they even collected 9,000 dollars for the minaret), so they placed the order in Turkey³⁷.

The Adigeni City Council ruled that the construction of the minarets was illegal without the local authorities' permission, and fined the landowner 200 GEL and ordered the structure dismantled. When the government began dismantling the minaret amid clashes with local Muslims, it was assumed that government officials were implementing the city council's decision. However, the Ministry of Finance's Revenue Service was formally behind the dismantling, stating that it acted for an examination to determine whether the weight and commodity code of the minaret structure corresponded to the data declared at customs during its import to Georgia from Turkey in July³⁸.

Religious Conflict: Causes and Mediation

The results of research revealed that in the cases studied, representatives of the dominant religious group, Georgian Orthodox Christians, had no problem with Islam as a religion. For example, the Orthodox population of the village of Nigvziani said in interviews with various local media outlets that they lived peacefully with their Muslim neighbors and did not want a mosque in their village.

They urged Muslims to pray not in public, but in their own homes. If there were a functioning Christian chapel in the village, where Orthodox Christians could pray publicly, the question arises: why couldn't Muslims do the same in a mosque? However, the only argument justifying this attitude was that the Orthodox represented the majority of the rural population³⁹. Also in the village, Chela, there had never been religious conflict between Muslim and Orthodox Georgians before the incident discussed in the study. As the investigation revealed, despite their religious differences, good-neighborly relations always existed between them. Moreover, as one of the Muslim Georgians noted, they even helped their Orthodox villagers build the church. An Orthodox resident of Chela also confirms this. "Yes, that is true. They brought stone and other materials in their own vehicles. We were like brothers. There was no conflict between us in life; we had a perfect relationship"⁴⁰. Moreover, as is clear from the statement issued by the Council of National Minorities under the Public Defender of Georgia regarding the aforementioned confrontation, no Georgian Orthodox signed the request from one of the initiative groups to demolish the mosque. Moreover, the entire village, including the Christian Chela residents, followed the people beaten and arrested as a result of the conflict during the demolition of the minarets in Akhaltsikhe (the central city in the region)⁴¹.

The study also revealed fascinating facts about the government's involvement in the conflicts under study. On the one hand, in all three cases considered, the government is quite passive in resolving the conflict; on the other hand, representatives of local government are, to some extent, considered instigators of the conflict. As the Muslim population of the village of Nigvzinai states, for example, in their case, the negative involvement of a local government representative, the village governor, was an obvious fact:

“They tell us that since we settled in Guria, we have to convert to Christianity. Two years ago, when the disagreement first arose, the district governor, Gia Goguadze, also intervened. Goguadze also cared about our Christianization. We are working because we have to convert you to Christianity. During my term as governor, there was no mosque, and there will never be one”⁴².

We can also speak about the discriminatory treatment of Muslim Georgians by the authorities in the pre-conflict period in the case of Kobuleti. City Hall restricted the water supply to a religious school in Kobuleti. However, in the same Kobuleti case, another state structure, the court, partially satisfied the claim of the chairman of the “Georgian Muslim Relations”. Individuals were ordered to eliminate ongoing discriminatory practices in order to ensure the unrestricted use of property in Kobuleti, including the opening

and operation of a boarding house for Muslim students in the building. It meant the termination of the plaintiffs' and persons associated with the boarding house's enjoyment of property rights, their freedom of entry into the boarding house, and their freedom of movement in the surrounding area of the building⁴³. Georgian Muslims consider the local government and its initiative to be one of the actively involved parties in the confrontation that took place in the village of Chela. The Adigeni City Council decided to demolish the minarets after a part of the local Orthodox community collected signatures. However, even in the face of the demolition of the minaret and the resulting conflict, part of the same Georgian Orthodox population states that they had no problem with the existence of the minaret, and when collecting signatures, the issue was not the dismantling of the minaret, but rather the fact that prayers were not loud and did not disturb the rest of the population. As one representative of the Orthodox community stated, “If it does not bother anyone, why shouldn't it be there? It should be there. The minaret was standing there, and nothing bothered me. I do not even know what a minaret represents”⁴⁴. The respondents interviewed during the research process also point to this type of involvement by the government and the dangers of a one-sided approach, believing that in regions such as Adigeni and the village of Chela in particular, where there is a threat of inciting conflict on reli-

religious grounds, it is entirely unacceptable for the government to commit such actions and, accordingly, to some extent, provoke conflict⁴⁵.

Another interesting fact emerged during the research process: in the case of the village of Chela, one argument for dismantling the minaret was that it had been imported from Turkey. It is also interesting that the local government used this argument. As one of the respondents noted, the state's dismantling of the minaret was clearly linked to its construction by a foreign country⁴⁶. The state's passivity is clearly evident in its approach to conflict resolution. On the one hand, for example, in the village of Nigvziani, the police did not investigate individual violations of the law and failed to ensure effective investigations⁴⁷. On the other hand, it indirectly entrusts the solution of the problem to the clergy, thus failing to demonstrate the state's function as the exclusive guarantor of human rights. "The state often fails to be impartial and enforce the law, which then allows some groups to place themselves above the law, along with frequent political provocations and the use of religious immorality to score political points with the religious majority"⁴⁸.

Conclusion

Thus, the analysis of the research results shows that, despite the historical tradition of tolerance, religious conflicts still occur among local communities in modern Georgia. In a

religiously diverse settlement, citizens coexist peacefully until representatives of the religious minority demand the public expression and enforcement of their beliefs, which then provokes protests from the religiously dominant group⁴⁹. During the research process, it was revealed that the conflict takes on an overt character in the construction of cult religious temples. Even though Muslim Georgians in the studied cases do not deny or hide their religion and openly follow their own faith and defend the dogmas defined by it, the dominant religious group confronts the religious minority on religious grounds precisely when they decide to build a cult temple.

In fact, the research process has shown that the incitement of religious conflicts among the local population in Georgia is not caused by the dogmatic and value differences between religions, but by the fear of the dominant religious group that the public performance of religious rituals by the minority will lead to the loss of their dominant position and privileges.

On the other hand, in religiously motivated conflicts, state policy is focused not on resolving them fundamentally, but on temporarily stopping them (pacifying them). Moreover, often the harsh steps taken by the state itself lead to the intensification of conflicts between Orthodox and Muslim citizens. State institutions fail to fulfill their role as a neutral "arbitrator" in the regulation of

religious conflicts. It is noteworthy that the judicial branch of government, when making decisions, takes into account the fundamental human rights recognized by the Constitution of Georgia and international law. However, the main problem is the implementation of court decisions. Local authorities, as a rule, create procedural obstacles for religious minorities and demonstrate bias towards the dominant religious group.

The research process confirms that the concept of the modern Georgian nation was, to some extent, based on Orthodox identity, which excluded people of other faiths from Georgian national identity, and, most of all, the ethnically Georgian but religiously Muslim population. The study clearly showed that the last

component of the triad of homeland, language, and unity – what Ilia Chavchavadze and 19th-century Georgian educators considered one of the most important aspects of the nation-building process – has not been fully achieved, even in modern Georgia. The study showed that the leading cause of conflicts between Muslim and Christian Georgians is the cultural-symbolic narrative based on Christianity, which often portrays Muslim Georgians as an outgroup. In conclusion, despite the legal establishment of the ideas of religious equality and civic nationalism, there is still a religious division: “us” and “them” in modern Georgia’s socio-political life, which causes some challenges to the ideas of tolerance and equality in practice.

Notes

* The grammar check of the article was conducted using Grammarly.

¹ Constitution of Georgia, *Chapter Two*, Article 16, 1995.

² S. Dundua, Z. Abashidze, *Ethnic and Religious Identities and Civic Integration Issues in Georgia*, Tbilisi, 2009.

³ A. D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, B. Blackwell, 1987.

⁴ Idem, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity*, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 18.

⁵ A. J. Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial*, Oxford University Press, 1954.

⁶ J. A. Armstrong, *Nations Before Nationalism*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982.

⁷ E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983.

⁸ It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss in detail the role of Christianity in Georgia’s historical past and/or in the process of building a modern state. However, one argument in support of this view is that, as early as the 9th century, the Georgian writer Giorgi Merchule defined ‘Kartli’ (which means Georgia) as the territory where liturgies are performed in Georgian.

⁹ F. Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969.

¹⁰ C. Calhoun, *Nationalism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

¹¹ A. Hastings., *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and*

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 - 16 I. Chavchavadze, *‘ორიოდ სიტყვა თავად რევაზ შლავას ძის ერისთავის კაზლოვის მიერ „შემლილოს” თარგმანზედა’*, 1860, publicist letters, issue 3, 2012, p. 12.
 - 17 S. Dundua, ‘Nationalism and the issue of nation-building in the nineteenth century’s Georgian political thought’, *Przegląd Narodowościowy/ Review of Nationalities*, no. 8, 2018.
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 - 19 Idem, *‘შინაური მიმოხილვა’*, publicist letters, Tbilisi, 1955, issue 5, p. 32.
 - 20 E. Bubulashvili, „ზაქარია ჭიჭინაძე-აჭარის გულშმატკივარი”, Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference dedicated to the 160th anniversary of Zakaria Chichinadze, June 27-29, 2014.
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 - 23 R. Sakva., *Soviet Politics, an Introduction*, Routledge, London and New-York, 1989.
 - 24 Constitution of Georgia, Article 9, 1995.
 - 25 The Constitutional Agreement between the Georgian state and the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia, 2002, Patriarchate of Georgia, <https://patriarchate.ge/>, (accessed on October 10, 2025).
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- ³² Annual Report of the Public Defender of Georgia, “The Situation of Human Rights and Freedom in Georgia”, 2017. file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/Public%20Defender%20-%20Human%20Rights%20Report%20-%202017.pdf (accessed on October 10, 2025)
- ³³ Ibidem.
- ³⁴ GHN (Online publication), “The Patriarchate assesses the religious confrontation in Kobuleti as a provocation”. 2014 წ. 11 სექტემბერი, https://ghn.ge/news/114458-sapatriarko-kobuletsi-momkhdar-religiur-dapirispirebas-provokatsiad-afasebs?-utm_source=chatgpt.com, (accessed on September 25, 2025).
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