Religious Revival and Deprivatization in Post-Soviet Georgia: Reculturation of Orthodox Christianity and Deculturation of Islam

Pınar Köksal, Ayşegül Aydıngün and
Hazar Ege Gürsoy
Middle East Technical University

Abstract: The countries of the former Soviet Union witnessed a religious revivalism in the final years of the regime, although following the collapse, the revivals of the different faith communities have had different characteristics. This article discusses the nature of the desecularization and deprivatization processes of both the Orthodox Christian Georgians and the Muslim minorities in Georgia. Based on field researches and indepth interviews conducted with elites and experts, it is argued that the revival of Orthodox Christianity in Georgia differs from the revival of Islam. While the Islamic revival has taken the form of a deculturation, very much in line with global processes, the Orthodox Christian revival is taking the form of a reculturation.

The growing significance of religion in the post-Soviet space has launched new debates in social sciences, related particularly to religious revival and secularism, and this has opened new grounds for the testing of the explanatory powers of existing theoretical approaches. While some theories view secularization as an inevitable condition and a consequence of modernization, other theories reject this "inevitable" link between secularization and modernization as the revival of religion is a global fact. Many scholars, including Peter Berger, José Casanova, and Olivier Roy, have discussed the "mistakes" in the theories of secularization, emphasizing the complex relationship between modernity and secularism. Berger introduced the term *desecularization* "to denote a variety of

Address correspondence and reprint requests to: Ayşegül Aydıngün, Middle East Technical University, Department of Sociology, 06800, Ankara, Turkey. E-mail: aydingun@metu.edu.tr

manifestations of the worldwide resurgence of religion" (cited in Karpov 2010, 232), arguing that we are living in a desecularized world, but with certain exceptions (Berger 1999). According to Berger, modernization has a secularizing effect more in some places than in others, and has actually "provoked powerful movements of counter-secularization" (Berger 1999, 3). The post-Soviet space is no exception to this, where religious revival and desecularization are, first and foremost, a reaction to the forced secularization of the Soviet regime. Desecularization refers to the deprivatization of religion, a term introduced by Casanova (1994) to signify a global trend that can be linked to the refusal of religion to be confined to the private sphere, as well as its encroachment into the public sphere. It is important to refer to Casanova, as he is one of the leading scholars who critically approached the theories of secularization arguing that religion is not in decline in today's modern societies, and is neither marginalized nor privatized. In other words, religion in many parts of the world "went public", leaving its "assigned place in the private sphere" (Casanova 1994, 3). Casanova argues that as a result of the "sudden eruption of religion to the public sphere" it became clear that the differentiation between the religious and secular spheres did not necessarily mean privatization (1994, 19).

In this regard, there is a need for studies to uncover different forms of deprivatization, such as reculturation and deculturation, in different societies and among different faith groups. As explained by Roy (2010), the religious revival resulted either in a breakaway of religion from culture in the form of an abandonment of culture (deculturation), or in the reconstruction and a reestablishment of the link between culture and religion (reculturation). Elaborated by Roy, these two concepts are used in this paper to analyze the religious revival of Georgian Orthodox Christianity and Islam in post-Soviet Georgia.

As a result of religious revival that became obvious in the 1980s, especially in countries like Georgia, where traditional churches had historical power and importance, the political and social influence of the church has increased. In post-Soviet Georgia, Orthodox Christianity became influential not only at a societal level but also at a state level. The Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) managed to increase its standing as an active and prominent actor in the public space, very much in contradiction with many other religious upsurges, including the Islamic one experienced by the Muslim minorities in Georgia. Furthermore, the rise of religiosity in Georgia has ushered in the return of religion to the public sphere, to a point where it is challenging the secular state and has made Orthodox

Christianity even more of an important element of the national consciousness, challenging civic nationalism and democracy. Certainly, this has had an important impact on the minority religions, and especially on Islam, as the second largest religion in the country.

With a population of 398,700, Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds and sects constitute the 10.7% of the overall population of Georgia according to the 2014 census results.[1] This study focuses on three Muslim communities: Azeris, Adjarians, and Kists. The largest Muslim minority is Azeris with a population of 233,000, constituting the 6.3% of the population alone.[2] Azeris are a Turkic speaking community that lives compactly in Kvemo Kartli. They are referred to by several different names (i.e. Borchali Turks, Georgian Azerbaijanis, Georgian Azeris, Turks), and include both Sunni and Shia Muslims. Although the percentage of Shias and Sunnis is not known, Shias are estimated to constitute the majority. The second largest Muslim minority is Adjarians. Although ethnically Georgian, they are Sunni Muslims, the majority of whom live in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara. Historically they constituted a border between the Ottoman and the Russian Empires. The population of Adjara is 333,953 according to the 2014 census.[3] The population of Muslims is 132,852 corresponding to the 39.78% of the population.[4] Georgian Muslims is not a separate census category. However, with the exception of a few hundred Azeris and other Muslims, this population is overwhelmingly composed of Adjarians. Also, thousands of Adjarians are living in different parts of Georgia. The total population of the Kist community which is also discussed in this study is 5,700 according to the 2014 census.[5] Their socio-political significance, however, is greater than their percentage in the total population, especially in terms of deculturation and identity transformation they experienced as a result of their interaction with Chechens who migrated to Georgia after Chechen-Russian wars and their adherence to Salafi Islam. Kists live mostly in Pankisi. They are Vainakh originated Sunni Muslims, although many have recently changed their adherence to Salafi Islam.[6] The significance of the Muslims of Georgia is much higher than their population rate as they are perceived as the "historical other" by Orthodox Christian Georgians.

This paper discusses the nature of the ongoing deprivatization process that has resulted from the rise in religiosity in post-Soviet Georgia, among both the Orthodox Christian Georgians and the Muslim minorities. It is argued that the deprivatization of Orthodox Christianity differs from the deprivatization of Islam, in that for Orthodox

Christians, religion has strengthened its bond with the "original" culture through reclamation and revival, while for the Muslims of Georgia, including the Adjarians, Azeris, and Kists, religion has extended beyond its "original" culture. In this regard, while deprivatization among Orthodox Christians has taken the form of a reculturation, the Islamic revival took the form of a deculturation, which is very much in line with the global revival of Islam.

For the analysis of the nature of the deprivatization of religion in Georgia, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with experts and prominent people in Tbilisi (in May 2015, November 2015, and April 2016) and in Batumi (June 2015 and October 2015). During the field research in Batumi and its surrounding villages (Kobuleti and Khulo) in June 2015 and October 2015, respectively, 19 and 29 in-depth elite and expert interviews were conducted with academicians, Muslim leaders, politicians, representatives of international organizations (such as USAID, Transparency International) and NGO experts. During the field research in Tbilisi in May 2015, November 2015, April 2016, and April 2017, respectively, 18, 45, 21, and 10 in-depth elite and expert interviews were conducted with NGO experts, Muslim leaders, officials of the Patriarchate, representatives of the State Agency for Religious Issues, representatives of the Office of Public Defender of Georgia (the Ombudsman's Office), academicians, and leaders of minority religions. Thus, a total of 142 interviews were conducted.

Interviews were used as the main data source in this paper, and each of them lasted for at least 1 hour. The experts were selected for their expertise in the field of religion and secularism independently of their religious identities. Elites were selected according to their position in their own religious communities. Thus, their religious identity was one of the main criteria for selection. The names of the elites and experts (NGO experts, academics, and public officials) and the governmental and non-governmental institutions came from many sources, and so the interviewees can be considered as highly representative of the Georgian experts and elites who shape or oppose the policies in the country. The anonymity of the interviewees was maintained due to ethical concerns and upon their requests. The names of the institutions, however, are mentioned, except in cases where the interviewees requested total anonymity. The interviews were conducted in English, Georgian or Turkish. Although the majority of interviews were conducted directly by the authors, a few interviews with officials were conducted in Georgian with the help of a translator.

ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM IN GEORGIA PRIOR TO THE DISSOLUTION OF THE SOVIET UNION

According to many scholars, Orthodox Christianity has always been an important aspect of self-identification and consciousness of the Georgian people (Jones 1989, 293; Suny 1994, 134; Pelkmans 2006, 143; Serrano 2014, 75). There is much evidence that Christianity spread to Georgia in the 1st century AD, although it did not become an official state religion until the early 4th century (Suny 1994, 21; Abashidze 2006, 18–23; Alasania 2006, 117–118; Asker 2016, 54). Georgia, as it is commonly understood, was the second country to adopt Christianity after Armenia, which was Christianized in 301 AD (Sanikidze and Walker 2004, 3).

Soon after the adoption of Orthodox Christianity, the GOC was founded in around 330 as a subordinate to the Antioch Church (Asker and Kahraman 2016, 25; Geffert and Stavrou 2016, 81). However, over the years the church transformed into a national church, and had become a semi self-governing body by the 5th century and fully self-governing by the 7th century (Grdzelidze 2010, 160). During the "Golden Age" of the Bagrationi Dynasty in the 11th century, the GOC, which had already gained influence in political and cultural life in Georgia, became autocephalous, and the Catholikos of the Church took the title of "Patriarch" (Toumanoff 1954). From then on, the GOC stood as a symbol of the values of the Georgian nation, and these values remain today as the backbone of Georgian society (Grdzelidze 2010, 162). As put forward by Roy (2010, 91–93), Orthodox Christianity has an ethno-national nature, and the autocephalous principle of providing each national church with its own patriarch demonstrates clearly the link between the church and the nation. This became more obvious during the Soviet era and after its dissolution, as each Orthodox majority country insisted on having its own autocephalous patriarchate (Radu 1998, 284; Borowik 2006, 273).

Islam, on the other hand, entered the Southern Caucasus in the 7th century with the Arab invasions, and this changed the political and social structures of the region permanently (Suny 1994, 27). The 8th century was characterized by clashes between the Khazars, Byzantines, and Arabs who sought to take control of the region, and by the Christian uprising among the Georgians, Armenians, and Albanians against Muslim rule (Suny 1994, 28). In the same century, the Arabs conquered Tbilisi and made it the capital of an Islamic emirate that endured for approximately 4 centuries. According to Sanikidze and Walker (2004, 5–6), there has been a Muslim community in Tbilisi since that time, even after King David II

conquered the city in 1122 and made it the capital of a newly established Christian state.

The time of the adoption of Islam and Islamic sects by the main Muslim minorities of Georgia varied. Azeris, who today constitute the largest ethnic minority group in Georgia, mostly adopted Islam in the 11th century under the dominance of the Seljuk Empire (Goyushov 2012, 2). With the expansion of the Safavid Dynasty in the region in 1501, Shah Ismail promoted the Shia version of Islam as the state religion, leading to the dissemination of Shiism among the Azeris (Goyushov 2012, 3). The adoption of Islam among the Adjarians, who are ethnically Georgian, occurred later than the Azeris. According to Liles (2012, 5), before the Ottoman Empire came to dominate the region in the 16th century, the Adjarian population was mostly Orthodox Christian. However, during the 17th century some Adjarians, especially the nobility, began to convert to Islam. These conversions occurred mainly for political reasons, such as to permit their promotion to high state positions, or for socio-economic reasons, like the Ottoman *millet* system, in which Muslim subjects paid less tax. One notable conversion to Islam was made by Prince Abashidze, who was subsequently appointed as the *Beg* of Batumi by the Ottomans (Pelkmans 2002, 254). Baramidze (2010, 525) makes a similar evaluation: "Islam was spreading mainly among the nobles. This was due to the socio-economic and political reasons. Before Tanzimat (Broad reform in the Ottoman Empire in 1839–1870) individuals converted to Islam as a result of their free choice". Although there was a relatively rapid conversion among the nobility, the conversion of the lower classes would continue until the 19th century (Sanikizde and Walker 2004, 6; Pelkmans 2006, 96). Islam was the dominant religion among the Kists and other Vainakh communities in the 19th century. The Kists migrated to Pankisi from the North Caucasus in the same century, and at that time they were predominantly Sunni Muslims (Sanikidze 2007, 265–266).

The existence of different religions in the region over the course of many centuries made religion an important identity marker for different faith communities, and as a consequence, religion became a source of both conflicts and alliances. A significant point that needs to be emphasized here is related to Georgia's alliance with Russia. Starting in the 15th century, the Ottomans, and Safavids struggled to dominate the region, and having entered into the fray in the 16th century, Tsarist Russia was able to increase its power in the region due mainly to the internal conflicts in the Safavid Empire. Some scholars suggest that

Christianity offered certain political and economic benefits, and served to strengthen the alliance between Georgia and the Russian Empire (Suny 1994, 21; Sabanadze 2010, 76). As Grdzelidze (2010, 170) mentions, it was on the basis of their common religion that the Georgian kings asked for Russia's protection. Although Orthodox Christianity contributed to the alliance between the Russians and Georgians, it is important to note that being under the rule of different Muslim Empires also contributed to the significance of religion for both Georgian and minority identities.

The union that was established between Russians and Georgians with the signing of the Treaty of Georgievsk in 1783 provided Georgia with protection from Ottoman and Iranian threats but led to its annexation by Tsarist Russia in 1801. In 1811, the status of the Georgian Church was downgraded, becoming subordinated to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) (Suny 1994, 57–59; Kekelia 2015, 122), and up until 1917, the Russian authorities applied reforms and regulations to the GOC related to its economic and institutional structure. Furthermore, and maybe more importantly, the Russian authorities implemented oppressive policies to weaken the dominance of the GOC in Georgian culture, triggering a reaction among Georgians that led to a rise of Georgian nationalism (Saitidze 2006, 173–176; Keskin 2017, 18). In order to control the institutional structure of the GOC, a dicasterium was established, similar to the Russian one, to function as a judicial and administrative body. Coming from a Georgian noble family, Varlaam Eristavi, who had studied in St. Petersburg and who was a member of the ROC, was appointed the head of the dicasterium as the first exarch of Georgia. With the abolition of the autocephaly of the GOC in 1811, the number of eparchies was reduced from 14 to two, and from 1811 to 1869, all church property, estates, and peasants were transferred to the state and the number of the GOC clergy was reduced. In 1817, Eristavi was replaced by the new exarch (Metropolitan Theophilact) and from then on all appointed exarchs were ethnic Russians until 1917 (Abashidze 2006, 116–127; Bubulashvili 2006, 136).

Besides reducing the authority of the church through institutional and economic sanctions, policies implemented for the russification of the GOC weakened the link between the church and the Georgian culture, and consequently, also weakened the influence of the church over the Georgian nation (Keskin 2017, 21–22). For instance, Theophilact decreed that all church ceremonies and rites were to be held in the Russian and Church Slavonic languages (Suny 1994, 84–85; Abashidze 2006, 128). As a result, the rural population, who on the whole did not

understand the Russian language, stopped attending church services (Abashidze 2006, 134; Kekelia 2015, 122). The russification policies also targeted the cultural symbols of the GOC: churches were given the names of Russian saints, old Georgian churches were reconstructed in the Russian style and the ceremonies dedicated to local Georgian saints were halted (Bubulashvili 2006, 139). The Georgian language was replaced by Russian in not only the theology schools but in all educational establishments, which spurred reactions among the Georgian elite. By the second half of the 19th century, the Georgian clergy started to voice its opposition to the ongoing russification policy and demanded the restoration of the autocephaly (Bubulashvili 2006, 161; Chitanava 2015). However, it was only after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, although not recognized by the ROC, that the GOC declared its autocephaly once again (Serrano 2014, 76). The declaration of the autocephaly gave the church a short-term opportunity to reestablish the connection between religion and culture, up until the consolidation of the Soviet regime and its anti-religious politics. Thus, Russian policies aiming at weakening the link between the GOC and the Georgian people may appear successful for a short period of time. However, the attachment of Georgians to their traditional culture and religion led to Georgians' reaction to a Russified GOC reflecting itself in church non-attendance. The GOC, on the other hand, also struggled and succeeded in the restoration of autocephaly in 1917.

Tsarist Russia aimed to take control not only of the GOC, but also the Muslims in the region. To this end, it passed a law officially recognizing the Muslim clergy in 1872, and in the following year the Administration of Transcaucasian Muslim Clergy, including an office of Sheikh-ul'-Islam for Shias and a Muftiate for Sunnis, was established in Tbilisi, which continued to function until the Bolshevik Revolution (Campell 2005, 13; Huseynov 2014, 1). The establishment of new administrative structures in the South Caucasus and the appointment of clergy by the state (Campell 2005, 12–13) caused the link between not only the Muslim clergy and the people, but also between Muslims of Russia and the neighboring Muslim empires, to break. As a result, Muslims came under the direct control of Tsarist Russia, which prepared the ground for the continuing control of the state over Islam, both in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

The Soviet era was a turning point for both Orthodox Christian Georgians and Muslims. The new regime promoted atheism, intensifying the loss of religious knowledge and experience in organized Christian life

that began during Russian rule. However, many Georgians remained adhered to Christianity as part of their cultural and family tradition (Grdzelidze 2010, 162–164; Gurchiani 2017b). Paradoxically, however, the Soviet regime somehow included a Christian Orthodox element when defining the Georgian national identity, and consequently, a link between "Georgianness" and the GOC was established (Balcı and Motika 2007, 346). The church became independent in 1943, further strengthening this link, which was now the only connection to the "glorious days" of independent Georgia (Kekelia 2015, 124). In the 1960s the GOC experienced a "minor revival", which accelerated in the 1970s reaching its peak following the election of Ilia II as the Catholikos Patriarch in 1977. As a result, the link between the GOC and the Georgian cultural survival was reinforced (Ikekovic 1997; Jones 2013, 227). In the 1980s, the Soviet regime became more tolerant of religion, and so religion became more visible in the public sphere. The GOC gained strength, and passed into somewhat of a renaissance: closed churches were reopened, destroyed churches were reconstructed, and new churches were built. In addition, the number of church publications was increased, and several religious higher education institutions, such as the Tbilisi Spiritual Academy, which opened in 1988, were (re-)established (Crego, 1994). All these developments on behalf of the GOC provided a strong basis for the reculturation of Orthodox Christianity to the whole country by the church. As a result, by the end of the 1980s, an active parish life had emerged (Grdzelidze 2010, 164).

Coming to Islam, in 1944 the regime established "the Spiritual Directorate of the Muslims of Transcaucasus" in Baku, following the model of the Russian Empire, to represent all Muslims in the region, including those in Georgia, where the Mufti of the Sunnis became a subsidiary of the Sheikh of Shias (Balcı and Motika 2007, 341–342). Muslim clergy and Muslims in general, similarly, experienced such a loss of religious knowledge, aggravated by a lack of an institutional mediator in Islam as opposed to Christianity. The revival of religion progressed differently for Muslims, who didnot have any opportunity to experience the renaissance that the GOC did, especially after the appointment of Patriarch Ilia II. The lack of educated Muslim clergy and the absence of a national administrative body for Muslims were the main reasons why the religious revival among Muslims of Georgia was delayed.

Towards the end of the Gorbachev period, under conditions of political turmoil and uncertainty, the GOC appeared as a symbol of stability and increased its power in parallel to the continuing increase in trust

towards the institution of the majority religion. Thus, it was in this period that the church gained influence in the political sphere (Jones 2013, 48). Needless to say, the dominance and the increasing power of the institution of the majority religion in the country had an impact on the revival of the minority religions, especially Islam, which was a religion that had been kept under control throughout history. As mentioned previously, the lack of a national religious institution and the loss of religious knowledge, which had occurred over many centuries due to state control and the lack of state support, pushed the Muslims of Georgia to live Islam only as part of cultural and family life, somewhat undermining culture and rendering a "traditional" religious revival impossible. It can be said that this constituted the main reason for Muslims to become open to the influence of religious movements coming from abroad that offered new religious roots for breaking the link between culture and religion.

POST-SOVIET RELIGIOUS REVIVAL AMONG ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS IN GEORGIA: RECULTURATION OF ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY AND DECULTURATION OF ISLAM

The revival of Orthodox Christianity gained speed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this period, the political elite and political institutions were unable to establish an effective and stable political system, leading to a loss of public trust. As a consequence of this political instability, the GOC began to take an active role in both society and politics, filling the ideological vacuum that had been left not only by the growing political and social instability, but also the economic unrest (Ladaria 2012, 107–108). Tsintsadze supports this argument by emphasizing the growing role of the GOC alongside several events such as "civil war, armed ethnic conflicts, and political and economic crises" (2007, 754). As argued by an expert from GRASS:[7]

> The church is stronger than political figures. The GOC has become an intermediary force in Georgia, which allows it to attain even more social power. The church is considered to be the fallback solution, and is seen as an agent that resolves problems when the efforts of politicians or others fail (Interview, Tbilisi, December 1, 2015).

In addition, as a result of the 1995 Constitution,[8] which recognized the special role of the GOC, the Constitutional Agreement[9] (known also as

the *Concordat*) made between the Georgian state and the GOC in 2002, which provided certain privileges to the church, and the incapability of post-Soviet governments, the church has consistently increased its power, influence, and visibility and took an active role in the public sphere. Islam however, was controlled by the state in the past, and was also controlled in the post-Soviet period. Georgia's Muslims were subordinated to the directorate in Baku known as the Caucasus Muslim Board from 1991 until 2011, when a national body, the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia was established. This administration includes a Sheikh and two Muftis appointed by the state, which is very much in line with Russian Imperial and Soviet models. Despite the establishment of a national religious institution, the appointment of the Muftis by the state deepened the rift between the clergy and the people at a time when the link between the GOC and Orthodox Christians was strengthening. Furthermore, the establishment of the State Agency for Religious Issues (the Agency) in 2014, which is responsible for mediating between the minority religions and the state—as was confirmed by the officials of the Agency during the interviews—was seen by many of the interviewees, including both the Muslim elites and several experts, as a mechanism for the control of religious minorities, especially Muslims. An expert from the EMC said:

> The Agency is a new state body that aims to unite all religious groups under the umbrella of one institution. The Agency declares its position as being to facilitate dialogue between the state and the minority religions. The problem is that such an agency also existed in the Soviet era, and this also linked religious communities to the head of state rather than Parliament … Another important issue is the money that the Agency allocates to different religions in compensation for the damages sustained in the Soviet era. The main problem in this regard relates to the restrictions on the use of this money. For instance, Muslims can use this money to pay the salaries of Muslim clergy. We think this is the main instrument for the control of this community (Interview, Tbilisi, May 29, 2015).

The interviews revealed that the link between Georgianness and Orthodox Christianity, which became stronger in the post-Soviet period, was the main reason for the cautious approach of the state to the largest minority religion. Consequently, Islam, which was not given the opportunity to revive its "traditional" version, remained open to the influence of global religious movements, as previously mentioned. In this context, it is of great importance to study the main historical, political, and socio-cultural reasons determining the nature of the deprivatization of Orthodox

Christianity, which was given the opportunity to revive its "traditional" form, and the deprivatization of Islam, which followed a totally different path, being under the influence of the global resurgence of Islam, which was at times fundamentalist.

RECULTURATION OF ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY IN GEORGIA

The historical significance of the GOC was underlined by all the elites and experts interviewed in Tbilisi and Batumi, regardless of their faith groups. They claimed that the GOC had not only united Georgians against other nations and powers in the past, but had also made the political union of different Georgian princedoms possible. The historical role of the GOC was explained by an ECMI[10] expert:

> There were narratives that I was taught at school. I learned that Georgia is an ancient nation and that religion played the most important role in its survival. I was taught that the only reason why such a small country like Georgia survived was thanks to religion. There have been so many different invaders, including Arabs, Romans, Byzantines, Persians, Ottomans, Mongols and Russians … Despite these, the Georgian people have stuck together, so now the GOC has a really important role in the identity of Georgians (Interview, Tbilisi, September 8, 2015).

Many experts such as Zedania (2012, 123), Rcheulishvili (2015, 5–6), and Agadjanian (2015, 24) stressed that it is for these reasons that Orthodox Christianity became integral to the ethnic identity, especially during the post-Soviet period. At this point, it may also be helpful to underline certain peculiarities of Orthodox Christianity. As mentioned by Olivier Roy, some Orthodox churches in Eastern Europe became "quasi-ethnic religions" identified with "a particular people" (2010, 33). According to him, the identification of the church and people "relies on a close link with the state" that "goes back a long way: well before the end of the Latin Empire of Constantinople, the Byzantine emperors took the leadership of religious affairs in hand … The Church as an institution then deployed itself within the political sphere." (Roy 2010, 91). Also, as mentioned earlier, the autocephalous principle in Orthodox Christianity that allowed each church to have its own Patriarch strengthened the identification between the church and the people. In this regard, one can argue that the establishment of an independent post-Soviet Georgian nation-state paved the way for the proliferation of the autocephalous GOC, increasing

its power in politics and society, which led to a religious revival linking the people, their religion, and their culture with great strength.

As the surveys conducted in 2006 indicated, the GOC became the most trusted institution in the post-Soviet period, with 93% of the population giving approval to its activities, endowing it with extremely significant potential in mobilizing the public (Künkler and Leininger 2009, 1078). A similar result (91%) was obtained in a poll conducted by the International Republican Institute in 2015, and this continuing societal support explains to a large extent why church officials take active steps to penetrate national politics, and why the influence of this institution in politics is increasing. The high level of trust enjoyed by the Patriarch is also apparent in many surveys. According to the poll by the International Centre on Conflicts and Negotiation conducted in 2008 (Watson 2010) and the survey by the Caucasus Research Resource Center in 2013, the Patriarch Ilia II was identified as the most trusted person in the country (Corso 2013) and this was confirmed by many of the interviewees in the present study. For example, an academician in Tbilisi said:

> In the 1980s there was a revival of national feeling, and one of the points of consolidation was our Patriarch. Suddenly, we had this nice person who was kind of friendly, noble-looking and soft-spoken. If you look at what he had been saying during the Soviet times, it had a very nationalistic slant, as it is now. So the church became extremely popular when the Soviet Union was no more (Interview, Tbilisi, May 28, 2015).

Due to the growing trust in the GOC and the Patriarch, and the resulting increase in their power in politics, the Georgian political elite used religion and their relationships with the church as a tool for mobilizing their voters. Consequently, they avoided making any criticism of the GOC, in fear of losing a powerful ally (Kakachia 2014, 2–3). A Georgian academician explained the link between the church and the politicians as follows:

> Gamsakhurdia neglected the problems related to religious issues. He had very bad relations with Ilia II and the church, and so could not win their support. Shevardnadze however, saw the potential of this institution and decided to involve the Patriarch in certain state affairs in order to gain legitimacy (Interview, Batumi, October 10, 2015).

The need for church support turned out to be the case even for Saakashvili, who had a clear orientation towards the West and Western

values, including secularism. After 2007, the popularity of his party started to wane as a result of the street protests organized by the opposition against corruption claims among the officials, and this led to the increase of funds allocated to the church. An expert from the EMC, during an interview, said:

The granting of money to the GOC started during Misha's government. Aiming to control the church, he gave them too much money, and this made the GOC even more powerful (Interview, Tbilisi, December 1, 2015).

According to Janelidze (2015, 71), "The government was trying to make up for its lack of popularity by gaining the support of the most popular institution." An expert from TDI[11] argued:

Not in his first period but in his second period, Saakashvili, in need of legitimacy, developed his relationship with the church. This was necessary in a country where 90% of the people go to church (Interview, Tbilisi, December 2, 2015).

In the last couple of years, however, the bond between the political elite and the church has been observed to become more ambiguous. While the majority of the Georgian political elite want their country to develop into a Western-style democracy in which there is respect for different opinions and religions and the protection of minority rights, most of them also accept and believe in the need for the increased status of Orthodox Christianity and the influence of the church in society (Sulkhanishvili 2012, 148).

Besides its influence in the political sphere, the GOC also became socially influential, with one of the main mechanisms giving the church the opportunity to increase its influence on the societal level being in the field of education. Article 5 of the *Concordat* provided the GOC with certain privileges in public education, stating "Educational institutions shall teach Orthodox religion upon their choice. Curriculums drafting and changing, teachers" appointment and dismissal shall be subject to Church competence" (Forbcaucasus 2014). The same article also mentions that the State and the Church should "mutually and equally accept diplomas, certificates and scientific degrees issued by educational institutions according to the rules determined by law," (Forbcaucasus 2014) and should launch joint educational programmes. In addition, state support should be provided to ecclesiastic educational institutions (Forbcaucasus 2014).

However, criticisms began to emerge regarding the growing power of the GOC in educational institutions. As Gurchiani (2017a, 1100–1101) claimed, "The high presence of traditional religion in public institutions became a problem of human rights, as it was connected with indoctrination and proselytism." Despite the 2005 law on general education, promulgated by the Saakashvili government in a bid to reduce the influence of the GOC in public schools, by abolishing compulsory religious courses, banning religious indoctrination and proselytization, removing religious objects from schools, and letting religious rituals take place only after school hours,[12] many NGO reports and interviewees defended the view that there were serious problems in the implementation of the law. For example, many schools still feature icon corners in the classrooms or in the common areas (Gurchiani 2017a, 1106; Chitanava 2016). This was confirmed by an NGO expert during our interview:

> I work specifically on issues related to discrimination and freedom of religion in public schools. You can see the icons of the Orthodox Church in any school you visit; and the lessons start with prayers (Interview, Tbilisi, May 29, 2015).

Another mechanism for increasing the power of the church at a societal level is the institution of spiritual fatherhood (in Georgian, *modgzvari*). The theological role of the spiritual father in Orthodox Christianity is to guide individuals along the path to salvation, assuming the responsibility of directing an individual towards the Christian way of life (Koutsas 1995, 1–6). Koustas (1995, 8–10) argues that there is a need to choose an experienced spiritual father if one is to avoid spiritual damage since theologically, the spiritual father should be obeyed as if he is God himself, even when his instructions do not seem acceptable. Observing the guidance of the spiritual father and the obedience that is shown to him means obeying the will of God, and this is the only route to forgiveness and salvation. The theological significance of the spiritual father was explained by a high ranking priest from the GOC during an interview in Tbilisi: "Without a spiritual father there is no success in the spiritual life. Each person should have a spiritual father. He is the guide to your salvation." (Interview, Tbilisi, April 6, 2016). The impact of spiritual fatherhood on individuals was explained during an interview conducted in Tbilisi with the leader of a minority religion, who mentioned that the spiritual father controls not only the theological mind but also the daily lives of

individuals. He added that a priest may know "the most intimate issues of his spiritual child", and that this transcends the limits of spiritual guidance. Furthermore, he said that the direct influence of the GOC on people is "through spiritual fathers who have access to the minds of the people" (Interview, Tbilisi, April 4, 2016).

Many scholars who have studied the rising religiosity in Georgia are intrigued by the fact that religious discourse has its strongest support among the urban youth with a higher level of education (Janelidze 2015, 77; Sulkhanishvili 2012, 138). In addition to this, official surveys going back to the 1980s indicate that it was especially young people who "sympathized with a close association between the GOC and national and ethnic identity" (Rcheulishvili 2015, 7), and this was confirmed by many of the interviewees. An expert from TDI stressed that having a spiritual father and attending church is considered "modern" among many Orthodox Christians (Interview, Tbilisi, December 2, 2015), and many of the interviewees said that these became "trendy" in the post-Soviet period. This rising religiosity was defined by some interviewees as "showcase Christianity", in which attending church is interpreted as a way of "presenting oneself", especially among the young. One NGO expert said:

> The church is popular among young people. If you go to a church on Sunday, you will see for yourself how popular it is. Most of the young people don't know what the Bible says, they don't read it. It is just a trend (Interview, Batumi, October 28, 2015).

The level of church attendance and the trend of having a spiritual father, especially among the younger generation, appear to be clear proof of the strength of attachment to the GOC, the "traditional" church in the country, representing the "traditional" religion. Gurchiani (2017b, 509–510) explains how the church, despite being open to negotiation, has regulated traditions, starting in the early years of the post-Soviet period. In other words, although the "boundary" or the framework of the traditional religion remains intact, certain elements of traditional religion are changing. The Soviet experience of scientific atheism, which confined religion to the domestic sphere, is one of the main factors that increased the capacity of traditional religion to negotiate. All these refer to a reculturation process in the sense that rising religiosity points to a revival of the "traditional" religion and its institution despite the reinterpretation or reformulation of certain practices, and as a result, religion has become an important element of the nation. The significance of the unifying role played by

the GOC in the early years of independence, its success in filling the political, cultural, and social voids, and its efficiency in providing the psychological support needed at a societal level determined the content of the revival of Orthodox Christianity. The limited revival during the Tsarist and Soviet periods had, of course, facilitated the post-Soviet revival that took the form of a reculturation. In other words, the revival of Orthodox Christianity took place without a rupture from culture, and it can be said that the bond between culture and religion actually became stronger (Aydıngün 2016, 407). At this point, a comparison of the GOC's experience and traditional churches' experience in the West allows us to "test" the explanatory power of western theories on religious revival and secularism including Roy's analysis. One striking difference between Western and Georgian traditional churches is that Georgia's experience of secularism contradicts many Western countries. While in the West the decline of traditional churches—despite increasing religiosity—is an indicator of deculturation (Roy 2010, 5–9), in Georgia the traditional church (the GOC) has managed to increase its power and popularity.

DECULTURATION OF ISLAM IN GEORGIA: MUSLIM MINORITIES

The fact that Islam had not had the opportunity to revive its "traditional" interpretation in the post-Soviet period has significant historical reasons that go back to the dominance of the Russian Empire in the region. As a result of this, Islam became a minority religion that lacked the support of the state and was perceived as a security threat as the dominant religion in the neighboring empires. Islam, although recognized by the Russian Empire, was controlled by it through the establishment of administrative bodies to represent the Muslims of the empire, and the Soviet regime continued the tradition by establishing similar institutions and by appointing Muslim clergy in parallel to the promotion of scientific atheism.

The loss of religious knowledge, which occurred in all religions in the Soviet period due to the oppressive attitude of the state and legal restrictions, was comparatively stronger towards Muslims. Soviet sanctions on religious rituals and the destruction of mosques and madrassas inhibited the raising of Muslim intellectuals, causing a drastic decrease in religious knowledge among the Muslim population. This was mentioned by the Adjarians interviewed in Batumi and the nearby villages. A former Mufti of Adjara explained the situation during the Soviet period as follows:

We lived under Soviet oppression for 70 years. Everything was forbidden. People had no religious knowledge. The Islamic creed we learnt from our grandfathers and grandmothers, who we called the "Ear Mullah" [in Turkish *Kulak Mollası*], was hearsay knowledge and very superficial (Interview, Batumi, October 22, 2015).

Furthermore, the lack of institutions for religious education during the Soviet period as well as the continuation of the same policy after the dissolution of the Soviet Union was mentioned by many interviewees. One of the former Adjarian Muftis interviewed said:

What we need is an educated clergy … priests had a better chance of higher education during the Soviet era … In our case, religious education remained insufficient. Our imams lacked the knowledge of priests and were incapable of engaging in religious discussions (Interview, Batumi, June 23, 2015).

Another former Mufti from Adjara explained the significance of the continuation of the lack of religious education and the control of the state in the post-Soviet period:

Just because I knew how to read and write Arabic, people called me "Khoja'. I was obliged to go to Rize [Turkey] after the collapse of the Soviet Union and learn the Quran, and so I became a "Khoja'. Although I said that I did not have sufficient knowledge, the state appointed me as the Mufti (Interview, Batumi, June 23, 2015)."

Interviews conducted for this study related to the Muslims of Georgia included not only elite Muslim Adjarians but also elite Azeris, Kists, and experts working with Muslim minorities and religions. The reasons for the lack of religious knowledge and the control of the state were highlighted also by the elites of the Kist community and the Azeris. For instance, an Azeri expert from the Civic Integration Foundation emphasized the political dimension of religious issues in the Soviet period, and explained how the state-appointed people as Mufti who had only limited religious knowledge as part of a control strategy that resulted in the Muslim community holding the Muftis in low regard (Interview, Tbilisi, December 1, 2015). As a result of this, the relationship between the people and their clergy was weakened, and was further affected following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and especially after 2011, with the establishment of the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia in Tbilisi and the appointment of Muftis and the Sheikh by the state, although

there was apparently a formal electoral process. A leading member of the clergy in Adjara said, "If you appoint the Muftis, you can control the community for only two hours during Friday prayers" (Interview, Batumi, October 29, 2015).

A number of interviewees also mentioned that the establishment of the State Agency for Religious Issues, which functioned in close cooperation with the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia, was another mechanism for control, despite uniting all religions under one roof. Many of the interviewees voiced their criticisms of the cooperation between these two institutions. As one non-Muslim expert mentioned during the interview, in its present form, the Agency "is an entity intended to keep Muslims at bay", and stated that he did not consider that they had done "any positive work up to now". He continued:

> The Agency does not contribute to integration; it actually creates tension within the Muslim community. Those who are obedient receive financial support, and not the others … they are given money to keep their mouths shut … the impact of this policy will be minimal … the reputation of the Agency is declining (Interview, Tbilisi, April 5, 2017).

The revival of Islam in post-Soviet Georgia was in a way delayed not only because of the weakness of religious knowledge among the clergy but also due to the state policies aimed at taking Muslims under control, as Islam continued to be perceived as a threat to the security of Georgia. Our research revealed that restrictions limiting the revival of traditional Islam and the exclusion of traditional Islam from the public space did not eliminate the religious demands of Muslim communities. The lack of support offered to minority religious organizations in general, and the limited response provided by the state to the needs and demands of the Muslim minorities, in particular, made them more open to the influence of religious groups coming from abroad. These groups came either from neighboring countries like Turkey, Iran or Chechnya (the Russian Federation) or from other Muslim-majority countries, such as Saudi Arabia, some of which are radical and fundamentalist. One of the prominent elites of the Azeri community said:

> Those [Salafis] who went to Pankisi from Saudi Arabia came also to Kvemo Kartli but they are more active in Pankisi. They define themselves as *Ehl-i Sünnet* and *cemaat*. The built mosques in Shia villages. Salafis do not consider Shias as Muslims. They call them *rafizi*.[13] They want to convert Shias to Salafism and to convince them they put forward the differences of *Ehl-i Sünnet* from Shias. (Interview, Tbilisi, April 5, 2016).

All of these factors constituted the main motivations behind the deculturation of the Islamic religious revival. A leading member of the Adjarian Muslim community said, "Georgia's policies open the path for Wahabis and Salafis" (Interview, Batumi, October 29, 2015). Explaining the impact of religious movements on the young Kists and the need for religious knowledge, a woman from a leading Kist family said:

> When the Soviet Union collapsed, young people lacked knowledge of religion… After the 1990s there was no systematic policy towards Pankisi. The Georgian state did nothing. This was a forgotten region; we had no madrassa, nothing. Religious knowledge was weak … which is why the Salafis were successful. They were financially powerful and the young Kists were unemployed. This created a fertile ground for Salafi propaganda. The Salafis not only taught religion, but also made strong ideological propaganda (Interview, Tbilisi, December 3, 2016).

This statement shows that the dissatisfaction with state policies towards Muslim minorities among young Kists compelled them to search for new opportunities to learn Islam, and this need was fulfilled by the Chechen migrants coming to the region during the Chechen-Russian wars. The rapid dissemination of Salafi Islam by these Chechen migrants was supported by some Arabic countries.

A Muslim Georgian journalist from Adjara blamed the radicalization of young people on the nonfulfillment of Muslims' requests, stating that a petition of 12,000 signatures had been raised requesting a new mosque in Batumi as a sign of their dissatisfaction. She went on to recall that in a recent video released by four ISIS members from Georgia, one of whom was from her village, it was stated that Georgia would be one of the next targets.[14] A TDI expert explained the global influence affecting the issue:

> Muslim people in Adjara are, first and foremost, Georgian, and that Islam should be a matter of culture; however feelings of alienation among Muslims push them to join radical movements. Even youngsters from Adjara have joined ISIS, and the blame for this can be laid on alienation (Interview, Tbilisi, December 2, 2015).

These two quotations offer a clear indication of how young Kist and Ajdarian Muslims, especially those born after the collapse of the Soviet Union while looking to form a religious identity, fall under the influence of different religious groups who promote the universality of Islam through challenging culture. It was apparent from the interviews that

this is also true for young Azeris, some of whom have also joined ISIS. Parallel to this, Clifford (2017) stated that the estimated number of people who have joined ISIS since 2011 in Georgia ranges between 50 and 200, of which 30 jihadists were killed in action.

The influence of religious organizations in neighboring countries was explained by an expert from Open Society as follows:

> Religious organizations in neighboring countries are active especially in Adjara, Kvemo Kartli and Pankisi … the Ministry of Security announced that to date, 50 people, particularly from Adjara, had gone to Syria. From the Muslim Adjarians, Pankisi Kists and Chechen IDPs [internally displaced persons], there are people trying to join ISIS (Interview, Tbilisi, December 3, 2016).

An Azeri NGO leader working in the field of minority rights stressed the influence of neighboring countries on the Sunni and Shia Muslims of Georgia, highlighting the fragmentation caused by the presence of different religious groups that compete with each other:

> In the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a number of religious organizations from Turkey, Azerbaijan and Iran started to work in Georgia … Iran has significant influence among Shia Azeris, and if you criticize the Iranian president, they get angry. As a result, a Shia/Sunni divide emerged among ethnic Azeris, with some of the Azeris from the Kvemo Kartli region supporting Iran more than Azerbaijan, because it is an Islamic state (Interview, Tbilisi, December 1, 2016).

The activities of different religious groups coming from different countries were mentioned by many interviewees as a fact that deepens the divisions (ethnic and/or sectarian) that exist among the Muslims of Georgia. Many interviewees stressed that even Sunni Azeris are divided as a result of the existence of the competing Sunni religious groups in Kvemo Kartli that come mostly from Turkey - such as *Süleymancılar*, *İsmailağa Cemaati*, *Aziz Mahmud Hüdai Cemaati* - and that are also active in Adjara. In terms of the Turkish influence over the Muslims of Adjara, the above-mentioned Muslim Georgian journalist expressed that it was generally young Muslims from the mountainous parts of Adjara who go to Turkey. She voiced her concerns related to this, saying that she did not like their worldviews upon their return, as they are unable to adapt to the Georgian social reality. According to her, they tend to return with a dogmatic understanding of Islam, telling women not to wear pants and

not to go to the beach. Highlighting not only the fragmentation between the Orthodox Christian and Muslim Adjarians, but also between traditional Muslims and those under the influence of different religious groups of Turkish origin, she argued that modern Muslims who are integrated into society cannot understand them, and eventually they become alienated.[15] An expert in Adjara explained the impact of those Adjarian Muslims educated in Turkey as follows:

> Those who had religious education in Turkey in the 1990s became the new leaders of their community and what they have learned contradicted the traditional understanding of Islam. This led to confusions related to Islamic knowledge. Young people questioned who they are as their grandfathers' practice was different from the one newly learned (Interview, Batumi, June 22, 2015).

The impact of those mostly educated in Turkey on local Muslims is also elaborated by Baramidze (2015) who stressed that the adoption of the "canonical" religious systems gradually eliminated "traditional" rituals from everyday life.

Furthermore, a strong deculturation has occurred, resulting in significant tension between members of the Kist community who have sought to preserve their culture and those who criticize them in search of a pure Islamic understanding (Aydıngün, Asker, and Üner 2016, 350–362). This deculturation of Islam among the young Kists has reshaped the hierarchy within the community and has challenged the power of the traditionalist elders who are supposedly less knowledgeable about Islam, and this has resulted in a transformation in the Kist identity. A middle-aged traditionalist Kist woman explained the tension between the younger and older generations of Kists as follows:

> I do not want to participate in discussions and disputes between father and son, because it is not the Kist way. Of course I respect young people who have received religious education abroad, but a Kist should behave with decency. A Kist should respect the elderly. I should say that if you prohibit Kist men from dancing by saying it is against Islam, this is a fight against our culture (Interview, Tbilisi, December 3, 2016).

As regards the tension between the youth and the elderly and their perception of tradition, a young Salafi having a leading position in the Salafi Kist community argued:

> We are Salafis. What is essential for us is the Quran and the Sunna. We accept traditions that are not in contradiction with the Quran and the Sunna. The tension with the elderly takes place because they give priority to tradition (Interview, Tbilisi, April 5, 2016).[16]

The dominance of *adat* (customary law) over religion and the observance of this custom by the traditionalists are put forward by Ia Tsulaia (2011, 136–137). According to her, this constitutes the main source of tension between young Salafis and the traditionalists, as also demonstrated in the above-mentioned quotations. The words of an Azeri elite clarified how Salafism is disseminated among not only Kists but also Azeris through excluding and criticizing *adat*:

> There are three main reasons for the dissemination of Salafism. First, Salafis reveal the "mistakes" of the practices of ordinary Muslims such as *muta* marriage and attaching rags to the trees. Second, they give money. They give it once but at such a time that the person becomes very grateful and start to follow them. Third, they make use of ignorance. People don't know Islam, neither Sunnis nor Shias. Salafis tell them their version, send them computers and teach [pure] Islam (Interview, Tbilisi, April 5, 2016).

To conclude, as demonstrated in the research data, the non-fulfillment of the religious demands of the Muslims, which was the main reason for lack of religious knowledge, has resulted in their alienation from the state and much of society. This has strengthened their attachment to their religious identity, and made them open to the influences of certain deterritorialized Islamic movements, some of them being radical and challenging their cultural norms and values. As a result of these developments, the religious revival of Muslim communities has taken the form of a deculturation. However, it is noteworthy that the deculturation is an ongoing process, which does not involve the entirety of the Muslim communities as traditional segments continued to resist to the deterritorialized Islamic movements. In line with Roy's argument (2010, 9), segments of the Muslim communities which adopted Salafi Islam are a fundamentalist, literalist, and at times jihadist as they search for a "pure religion" and seek a return to explicit religious norms by breaking away from culture. Other segments which adhered to other non-literalist religious movements coming from abroad, mostly from Turkey, such as *Süleymancılar*, *İsmailağa Cemaati, Aziz Mahmud Hüdai Cemaati* are also experiencing a break from culture. However, it is not possible to define them as

fundamentalist as they are not in quest of a "pure religion" but rather follow the interpretations of different religious leaders who have no intention of political power.

CONCLUSION

Our research has demonstrated that after religion in Georgia "went public", different forms of deprivatization were experienced, taking the forms of deculturation and reculturation. The traditional church, the GOC, has managed to increase its power and popularity through what can be defined as a reculturation. Another important finding of the field research was that the experience of Orthodox Christianity differs from the experience of Islam in Georgia. In this regard, the process of deculturation that is mostly promoted by Islamic fundamentalism (Salafism) in a bid to claim universality, and which has influenced the Islamic revival in Georgia, as mentioned by Roy (2010), is not valid for Orthodox Christianity. In other words, although both Orthodox Christianity and Islam are experiencing a revival in Georgia, the Islamic revival is taking the form of a deculturation (a transformation or reformulation of Islam), very much in line with global processes. In addition, however, there are non-fundamentalist global religious movements such as *Süleymancılar*, which contribute to the deculturation process.

The main factor behind the different forms of revival being experienced by the two religions is the state support that is provided to the titular religion and the GOC of the country, which has historical significance. This was something that was emphasized clearly by all the interviewees, and is confirmed by the Constitution and the *Concordat*, while similar support is not enjoyed by Muslims, who voiced their dissatisfaction with the restrictions related to the visibility of Islam—which is approached from a security perspective—in the public sphere. The new constitution adopted by the parliament on September 26, 2017, restricting freedom of religion and belief when deemed necessary for national security and public safety, confirmed the concerns of the critics regarding the implementation of complete freedom of religion in Georgia.

As demonstrated in the research data, rising religiosity, although valid for all the segments of society, is taking place particularly among the young people. While young Orthodox Christians are experiencing a religious revival in the form of a reculturation by being attached to the GOC, the traditional Church of the country, young Adjarians, Azeris,

and Kists tend to perceive the revival of Islam as a deculturation, being affiliated with different foreign religious groups with their own particular interpretation of Islam. This has resulted in estrangement not only from one's own culture but also from the common norms and values that had until recently kept Georgian society together. Furthermore, this lack of unity has led to fragmentation within each of these communities in the form of deepening generational, sectarian and ethnic differences, preparing the ground for radicalization. Many civil servants and politicians in Georgia believe that the state should support the development of traditional Islam to prevent the dissemination and strengthening of Islamic movements coming from abroad.[17] Based on interview data, however, it is important to mention that strong reactions have been voiced to such support by both the GOC and much of Georgian society. The way the governments manage religious diversity in Georgia—through either the support or exclusion of traditional Islam—will determine the future of radicalized Islam in the country.

NOTES

1. GeoStat.ge (2016a), 2014 General Population Census- Main Results, General Information http://geostat.ge/cms/site_images/_files/english/population/Census_release_ENG_2016.pdf, p. 9 (Accessed April 1, 2018).

2. GeoStat.ge (2016a), 2014 General Population Census- Main Results, General Information http://geostat.ge/cms/site_images/_files/english/population/Census_release_ENG_2016.pdf, p. 8 (Accessed April 1, 2018).

3. GeoStat.ge (2016a), 2014 General Population Census- Main Results, General Information http://geostat.ge/cms/site_images/_files/english/population/Census_release_ENG_2016.pdf, p. 4 (Accessed April 1, 2018).

4. GeoStat.ge (2016b), 2014 General Population Census, Population by Regions and Religion, http://census.ge/en/results/census1/demo (Accessed April 1, 2018).

5. GeoStat.ge (2016a), 2014 General Population Census- Main Results, General Information http://geostat.ge/cms/site_images/_files/english/population/Census_release_ENG_2016.pdf, p. 8 (Accessed April 1, 2018).

6. There are also other Muslim minorities such as Avars, Ingiloys, and Meskhetian Turks that are not studied in the scope of this article.

7. Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS). http://grass.org.ge/en/ (Accessed September 22 2016).

8. Article 9 of the Constitution of Georgia recognizes the special role of the GOC, stating that the "state shall declare complete freedom of belief and religion, and shall recognize the special role of the Apostle Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia in the history of Georgia and its independence from the state" (For further information: http://www.parliament.ge/files/68_1944_951190_CONSTIT_27_12.06.pdf).

9. The text of the *Concordat* (Forbcaucasus 2014), as is very clear in its wording, appears to be signed by two equally powerful organizations, and it may be argued that in practice the church became a power center on an equal standing with the political authority. The view put forward by an expert from Transparency International during an interview conducted in Batumi explains well the perception of the *Concordat* in society: "The *Concordat* was signed in 2002. At that time I was a student, and I remember people thinking that the state had declared Orthodox Christianity as the state religion." (Interview, Tbilisi, October 15, 2015). While the *Concordat* separated the church from the state, it also provided the church with important privileges, the most significant of which

was the determination of the legal status of the GOC as a legal entity under public law. The GOC continues to be *primus inter pares* thanks to the several other privileges provided by the *Concordat,* such as exemption from military service, from property tax, VAT tax, land tax, and recognition of the ownership of all Orthodox churches and monasteries in Georgia, including ruins, land plots and church treasures. It is worth mentioning that with this agreement, the state secured compensation for the damages suffered by the GOC in the 19th and 20th centuries (TDI 2014, 16–31).

10. European Center for Minority Issues (ECMI). http://ecmicaucasus.org (Accessed November 28 2016).

11. Tolerance and Diversity Institute - TDI. http://tdi.ge/en/about-tdi (Accessed September 22, 2016).

12. United States Department of State. 2015. "2014 Report on International Religious Freedom Georgia", October 14, http://www.refworld.org/docid/562105a3e.html (Accessed May 4, 2017).

13. *Rafızi/Rafıdi* is derived from the Arabic word *Rafada* and means to refuse. It is used by the Sunnis to designate Shias who refused to believe in the first three Caliphs.

14. A comment made in the conference entitled "Islam in Georgia-State Policy and Vision from Regions" organized by Caucasian House, held in Tbilisi on April 5, 2016.

15. A comment made in the conference entitled "Islam in Georgia-State Policy and Vision from Regions" organized by Caucasian House, held in Tbilisi on April 5, 2016.

16. See also (Siprashvili 2014, 21-22).

17. This view was also confirmed by the officials from the Agency during the interviews. State Agency for Religious Issues News (2016) "Report 2016 of the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia" http://religion.geo.gov.ge/eng/news/report-2016-of-the-administration-of-muslims-of (Accessed December 19, 2017).

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