

The Journal of International Relations, Peace Studies, and Development

Volume 2
Issue 1 *The Journal of International Relations,
Peace Studies, and Development*

Article 10

2016

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Recommended Citation

Jessica Preston (2016) "Pig Heads and Petty Hooliganism National Identity and Religious Freedom in the Republic of Georgia," *The Journal of International Relations, Peace Studies, and Development*. Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/agsjournal/vol2/iss1/10>

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Pig Heads and Petty Hooliganism National Identity and Religious Freedom in the Republic of Georgia

Jessica Preston

After the fall of the Soviet Union, many scholars observed and recorded a religious revival taking place in the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). This religious revival happened at a time when nations were re-identifying themselves from “Soviet” people to a redefined national identity. Post-Soviet nations wanted to define what it meant to be a person from that country; this included being from a certain ethnic group, speaking a certain language, identifying with a certain religion, and opposing an ‘Other’. Specifically, Georgians defined themselves as being ethnically Georgian, speakers of the Georgian language, Orthodox Christian, and defined the ‘Other’ as both Islam and Communism.

The nationalist mobilization that happened in many parts of the USSR before its collapse, succeeded in fueling national pride, but it also alienated minorities within the countries. In recent scholarship, the Republic of Georgia’s minorities are normally limited to discussion about the Abkhazian and South Ossetian ethnic conflicts. Yet in the autonomous region of Adjara there is a religious minority of ethnically Georgian people who identify as Muslim. As I will explain later in this essay, the term “Georgian Muslim” has been rejected by a majority of the Georgian population. With the rise of religious divergence in Europe and in other parts of the world, it is crucial that the Muslim minority in Adjara is examined more closely by scholars interested in possible sources of instability in the region. Why would a country of only 4.5 million people alienate a portion of their population that identify as Georgian, simply because they are of a different religion?

The case of the Kobuleti madrasa incident that took place in 2014, in which Orthodox Georgians verbally harassed Muslim Georgians and a pig’s head was nailed to the door of a Georgian Muslim school, will be a main focus of this essay. In order to make sense of this event, and the divergence between Orthodox and Muslim Georgians, I will cover the cultural and religious history of the region, and examine where Georgian Orthodox and Georgian Muslim identities come into conflict. Finally, I will discuss the violation of Georgian Muslims’ religious freedom that occurred in Kobuleti in 2014 and examine how this event encompasses the religious divergence in Georgia today and what its implications could be.

Cultural and Religious History of Georgia and Adjara

Georgian Orthodox people proudly claim that Georgia was one of the first countries to adopt Christianity as an official religion. Christianity arrived in Georgia in the 4th century. The King of Kartli-Iberia, which is in modern day Western Georgia, was converted to Christianity by St. Nino, who is still one of the country’s most famous saints. Shortly afterwards, churches started to become a part of the Georgian landscape. In *The Making of a Georgian Nation*, Suny states that Christianity influenced the formation of unity among Georgian people.¹ At this time, Georgia sided against Muslim Iran and identified with Christian Byzantines. After the adoption of Christianity, Georgia was occupied by Islamic kingdoms and empires several times, but the majority of the nation remained

¹ Ronald Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994).

Christian. Georgia's historical narrative portrays the Georgian nation as a protector of their Christian identity against Islamic invaders.²

Georgia is made up of 12 regions, all of which have distinctive characteristics from one another. Adjara, located in south western Georgia, is a particularly unique region. Adjara shares a border with Turkey, and is well-known for its beautiful Black Sea coastline. The capital city of Adjara, Batumi, was historically a central trade route, exporting and importing goods between Europe and Asia via the Black Sea. While most of modern day Georgia was under Russian rule, Adjara was part of the Ottoman Empire from 1614-1878. During this time, Georgian people in Adjara were converted to Islam. There was also considerable Turkish linguistic and cultural influence, but people in Adjara continued to predominantly speak Georgian and kept up many Georgian cultural traditions.

In 1878, the Ottomans surrendered Adjara to the Russian Empire. Muslims were under considerable oppression at this time and many fled Adjara, migrating to present-day Turkey. Many other Georgian Muslims stayed and became faithful to the Russian Empire, seizing an opportunity to reunite with their Georgian heritage.³ Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Russia tried to win over the Georgian Muslims by ending policies that encouraged migration and financing the building of mosques in the Adjara region. The push for Christianization in the region had been ineffective, but despite being a religious minority, most Muslims in Adjara continued to identify as Georgian.⁴

During the First World War the "Committee for the Liberation of Muslim Georgia" was formed in Tbilisi to try to pull Georgian Muslims out from Turkish influence.⁵ When Communist authority entered the region and the threat to religious practices became apparent once again, three different perspectives for Adjara emerged: 1) to reunite with Turkey 2) break away from Georgia and form an independent Adjarian state 3) remain a region of Georgia. The pro-Georgian orientation proved to be dominant in the region. As Sanikidze states in his historical account of Adjara:

During the brief period of Georgian independence (1918-1921), a pro-Georgian orientation prevailed in Ajaria. This was made clear in the final declaration of the Ajarian People, which convened in Batumi during the period of British occupation in the fall of 1918. The declaration asserted that while the people of the Batumi district were Muslim by religion, they were Georgian by virtue of history, origin, language, and culture. It also claimed that territorially and economically the region had always been part of Georgia.

In 1921 Turkey officially reunited the region of Adjara with Soviet Georgia, under the condition that Adjara would be autonomous; it was the only region given autonomy in order to protect its religious minorities. Following this, the Soviet Union suppressed religion and therefore, during the Soviet times, Muslim and Orthodox Georgians saw little difference amongst themselves. They were all 'Soviet people'.

The *glasnost* policies which were initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev in the latter part of the 1980s significantly expanded freedom of expression in the Soviet Union, but, due to the new policies, a nationalist mobilization erupted in many Soviet states. In Georgia, the wave of nationalism was

² George Sanikidze and Edward Walker, "Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia," *Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies*, August 1, 2004, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/7149d486#page-5>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

coupled with a religious revival which became very apparent with the growing power of the Georgian Orthodox Church.⁶ Now, I will turn to defining the identities of Georgian Orthodox and Georgian Muslim people before taking a look at post-Soviet Georgia.

Georgian and Georgian Muslim Identity

To examine Georgian Orthodox and Muslim identities I use Brubaker and Cooper's definition of identity: "emotionally laden sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded group, involving both a felt solidarity or oneness with fellow group members and a felt difference from or even antipathy to specified outsiders".⁷

One cannot examine modern Georgian identity without looking to Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the first elected president of post-Soviet Georgia who promoted ethnic nationalism during and after the fall of the Soviet Union. Coming from the Georgian Orthodox church, these nationalist messages had a strong religious aspect. Through this, Gamsakhurdia established a robust sense of national identity, which included the Georgian Orthodox church as a main pillar of the Georgian identity.⁸ Firstly, the Georgian Orthodox Church distinguished Christianity in Georgia as separate from Russian Orthodoxy and the Soviet Atheist ideology. It also reinforced the historical narrative of Georgia as a protector of Christianity, and pushed Muslims into the 'Other' category, including Georgian Muslims. Those who opposed Georgian ethnic and religious identity were seen as a threat to the Georgian national identity.⁹

In sum, to be Georgian and to be considered Georgian by the majority of the population, one must possess three distinct characteristics: 1) be ethnically Georgian 2) speak Georgian language 3) believe in or identify with Georgian Orthodox Christianity.

Georgian Muslim Identity

From the three characteristics of what it means to be Georgian, one can obviously see where Georgian Muslim identity conflicts with Georgian majority identity. But it is important to consider that Georgian Muslims self-identify as Georgian. They are ethnically Georgian, speak Georgian, and have the same culture and traditions, including the traditional Georgian feasts 'supra' and Georgian dance. They feel patriotic towards the Georgian state, but also feel alienated by the majority of other Georgians.

Orthodox Georgians do not recognize Georgian Muslims as being properly Georgian. This unacceptance excludes them from what Brubaker and Cooper say as "involving both a felt solidarity, or oneness with fellow group members". Georgian Muslims do not experience solidarity with the majority of the Georgian population because they do not practice the majority religion. Orthodox Georgians often pressure Muslim Georgians to convert back to the religion of their ancestors and become full Georgians once again.¹⁰ Inga Popovaite's interviews in 2014 with Georgian Muslim women in the region of Adjara show the pressure and resistance of Georgian Muslim women to convert to Christianity:

⁶ Jonathan Wheatley, *Georgia From National Awakening to Rose Revolution* (Burlington, VT USA: Ashgate Publishing, 2005).

⁷ Rogers Brubaker and Fredrick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity,'" *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (September 2010), 14

⁸ Jonathan Wheatley, *Georgia From National Awakening to Rose Revolution* (Burlington, VT USA: Ashgate Publishing, 2005).

⁹ Tamta Khalvashi and Nutsa Batiashvili, "'Can Muslim Be a Georgian?'" *Historic Overview of Discourse on Georgian 'Essence' (University of Georgia, 2009)*.

¹⁰ Inga Popovaite, "Religious and National Aspects of Georgian Muslim Women's Identity in the Autonomous Region of Adjara" (master's thesis, Nationalism Studies, Central European University, 2014).

People ask me everyday: But why are you Muslim? You are a teacher, you know many things about the history of Georgia, how we lost our religion – Christianity – here in Adjara, you know many things about Christianity, so why are you still Muslim? But my answer is that: I know a lot about Georgian history but my grandmother and grandfather, my parents are all Muslims. This religion is in my heart and my soul and I cannot change it.¹¹

Now that cultural and religious history and the identity conflict between Georgian Orthodox and Georgian Muslims have been discussed, I will now move to post-Soviet Georgia.

Post-Soviet Georgia

Georgia's history after the fall of the Soviet Union highlights what has led to the intolerance and the divergence between Georgian Orthodox and Georgian Muslim people. In the early 1990s, Gamsakhurdia started speaking publicly about abolishing Adjara's autonomous standing within the newly independent Georgia. But Georgian Muslims, especially those in the mountainous areas protested fiercely against the abolishment.¹² Furthermore, Georgians in Adjara did not vote for Gamsakhurdia's Free Georgian bloc party, but instead voted heavily in favor of the Communist Party.¹³

In response, in 1991, Gamsakhurdia placed Adjara under the care of Aslan Abashidze. He served as a public servant during the Soviet times, and is from a historically prominent family of political and Muslim religious leaders in Adjara. Abashidze stayed in power as an authoritarian figure until 2004. While the rest of Georgia was plagued by civil war, Adjara remained relatively peaceful and prosperous during the 1990s. Abashidze developed good relations with Turkey and Russia during this time. He established his own small army in Adjara in order to keep peace and he strengthened Adjara's autonomy while the Georgian central government was involved in conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹⁴ Even though their autonomy was strong, secessionism never became a concern in Adjara. Adjarian people continued to have a strong sense of Georgian identity throughout the uncertain 1990s.¹⁵

Throughout the Gamsakhurdia and Shevernadze administrations, the Georgian government turned a blind eye to Adjara and the full autonomy that the region enjoyed. After the 2003 Rose Revolution, Mikheil Saakashvili took power in the central Georgian government and one of the goals of this new administration was to "crack down on separatism within Georgia".¹⁶ Tensions between Saakashvili and Abashidze were high, to the point that many predicted an armed conflict would take place. In May 2004, Adjarians demonstrated in the streets of Batumi against Abashidze's autocratic rule.¹⁷ Bridges connecting Adjara and the rest of Georgia were destroyed by Abashidze's forces and after being given a one-day ultimatum to step-down, Abashidze fled to Moscow where he still remains today. Adjara was reunited with the Republic of Georgia on May 7, 2004. Saaskhashvili further opened up the region to Turkish investors and religious tensions and violations of religious freedom started to

¹¹ Ibid., 1

¹² Jonathan Wheatley, *Georgia From National Awakening to Rose Revolution* (Burlington, VT USA: Ashgate Publishing, 2005).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Elkhan Nuriyev, *The South Caucasus at the Crossroads* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2007).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 211

¹⁷ Abashidze's greed had become obvious to Adjarian people, which led them to protest against him. He was later charged with embezzling 9.82 million lari.

become more prominent in Adjara at this time.¹⁸ Georgia's Orthodox majority saw the increase in Turkish investment as an invasion of Islamic identity. In turn, hostility towards Georgian Muslims increased starting in 2004, as Orthodox Georgians categorized them as Turkish sympathizers and refused to accept their self-identification as Georgian nationals.¹⁹

Violation of Freedom of Religion

On September 24, 2014, a pig was slaughtered in front of a Muslim boarding school in Kobuleti, Georgia, and its head was nailed to the door of the establishment. This occurred after six months of constant surveillance, verbal harassment, and physical barricades in front of the school, which inhibited the ability of students and staff to enter and exit the building. Local law enforcement officials did little to nothing to discourage the local community from committing these violations, and when the violators were finally charged, they received a sentence of "petty hooliganism" – a 100 lari fine.²⁰ To further examine this incident, Bielefeldt's explanation of religious violations will be employed.

As Bielefeldt claims in *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion*, "[Abuses of freedom of religion or belief] are perpetrated in the name of religious truth claims, in the interest of preserving national identity, for purposes of defending law and order or in the context of counter-terrorism agendas".²¹ He goes on to state that violations of freedom of religion that happen within societies originate from a "paradoxical combination of fear and contempt".²² He expands by explaining the paradox that fear normally stems from something seen as more powerful, while contempt is felt towards those that seem inferior. But most violations of religious freedom occur against minorities, and therefore against less powerful people.

Bielefeldt's explanation of reasons for religious violation is easily applicable to the case that occurred in Kobuleti in 2014. The incident in Kobuleti is the most recent highly publicized violation of Muslim minorities' rights in the Adjara region. The interviews and the lack of action taken by the state encompass the current status of the Georgian Muslim minority today. Human Rights Center²³ and Democracy and Freedom Watch²⁴ conducted interviews with the local Orthodox Christian population in Kobuleti which illustrates the denial of Georgian Muslim identity within the greater Georgian society:

If it is charity action and they intend to open a school here, then let them accept Georgian children too and teach them Georgian and Christianity, because Georgian Muslims do not exist in reality. (Human Rights Center Interview, 2014/15)

The denial of Georgian Muslims is what Bielefeldt would describe as an attempt to protect Georgian Orthodox national identity. In this case, the majority Orthodox Georgians want to preserve their Christian heritage. The next quote illustrates another point in Bielefeldt's theory:

¹⁸ Per Gahrton, *Georgia: Pawn in the New Great Game* (New York, NY USA, 2010).

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Nino Tsagareishvili, "Freedom of Religion in Georgia" (Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia: Human Rights Center, 2015).

²¹ Heiner Bielefeldt, *Freedom of Religion or Belief - A Human Right under Pressure*, vol. 1, 1 (Oxford Journal of Law and Religion, 2015), 26.

²² Ibid, 26

²³ Human Rights Center quotes were taken from a January 16, 2015 visit to the boarding school. A local Orthodox community member approached the Human Rights Center employee and demanded to know their religion and why they visited the school. The community member insisted that no Muslim school would be opened in her neighborhood.

²⁴ Democracy and Freedom Watch interviews were conducted in front of the Kobuleti Boarding School. People in the community came to the reporter insisting she hear their side of the story. The interviews were published in an article on October 4, 2014.

We were very happy at first, that there would be true Georgians living here. But this traitor was lying to us. However, we understood that there was something fishy here, when they [the new owners] wanted to build a three-meter tall fence, so the house would be hidden from us. Then we were finally told that there will be no Georgian families in this house, but some dark secret instead.²⁵

Here the interviewee describes Islamic education as a “dark secret,” which connects to what Bielefeldt would describe as the majority population often times describing small minorities as having a “mysteriously ‘infectious’ power” that could be potentially detrimental to society. The interviewee claims Islamic education to be “fishy” and questions the three-meter-tall fence as a sign of something that needs to be hidden, which shows her clear discomfort with religions outside of Orthodoxy being in her vicinity.

The last quote shows signs of complete denial of the fact that Islam is practiced in Georgia and gives an example of how Orthodox Christians do not view Georgian Muslims as Georgian, but instead a foreign entity:

There is not a single Muslim living here. And for us, Christians, who live here, this is a very scary situation. We do not accept and will never accept such things. We don’t want them here [...] We are not against their religion. They can pray as much as they want in their countries, in their lands, but not here, where true Christians are living.²⁶

Bielefeldt argues that the mix of fear and contempt produces aggressiveness in two forms 1) “aggressiveness from a feeling of vulnerability” and 2) “aggressiveness from the pretense of moral superiority”.²⁷ The quote above shows both vulnerability and the feeling of moral superiority and reiterates the idea that Georgian Muslims are not recognized in the Orthodox Georgian nation.

Conclusion

To answer the question in the introduction: “Why would a country of only 4.5 million people alienate a portion of their population that identify as Georgian, simply because they are of a different religion?”- one must look to the cultural and religious history of Georgia, as well as the majority Georgian identity which reinforces being Georgian as inseparable from Georgian Orthodoxy. Bielefeldt’s theory on violation of religious freedom further explains the aggressive behavior displayed towards Georgian Muslims, which stems from Georgian Orthodox peoples’ fear of losing their national identity, and the feeling of moral superiority over the religious minority. This is just one of many cases of religious divergence in the recent past, but this case is unique in the sense that these two groups of people find common identity in ethnicity, culture, language, tradition, values, and history. The intolerance examined in the case study is startling and condemned as unacceptable by most of the international community, including the EU and the US. But Georgians’ strong national and religious identity continues to perpetuate the prejudice- even 25 years after the nationalist mobilization. The continuation of discrimination and the inaction of the government to address these tensions and religious violations could potentially lead to further instability in the region.

²⁵ Inga Popovaitė, “Kobuleti, Where Muslims Are Not Welcome,” *Democracy and Freedom Watch*, October 2, 2014, <http://dfwatch.net/kobuleti-where-muslims-are-not-welcome-88539-31496>.

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Bielefeldt, *Freedom of Religion or Belief*, 27.

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