POLITICAL PROCESS, SOCIAL ACTIVITY AND INDIVIDUAL STRATEGIES IN GEORGIA: INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATIONS, STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY AND GEORGIAN MUSLIMS IN THE MEDIA

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The main goal of this study is to examine the influence of state politics on the Muslim community in Georgia. The study analyzes the activities of the state and media reports from 1990 until 2012. For this reason, the processes that took place at central and local levels and corresponding data from electronic media sources were studied, as well as both advantageous and disadvantageous factors related to the activities of the local Muslim organization "Samufto" in the national political context. The subject selected as a main topic of the study is the construction of the new Aziz mosque, named after Abdul-Aziz, who was the 32nd Sultan of the Ottoman Empire and ruled from 1861 until 1876, and a mosque with his name was in Batumi until 1940. The construction of the mosque was a part of Georgian-Turkish negotiations over the restoration of Turkish cultural heritage monuments in Georgia and Georgian heritage in Turkey. The arguments and positions formed around the issue of the construction of the Aziz mosque had an important influence on a state religious policy and ongoing political processes especially on the process of the 2012 parliamentary elections, when the new ruling party came to power and started a new phase of relations with the Muslims.

This article is fully based on materials published in online resources. Each represented position herein belongs to the side described in each case.

Just as we can discern the influences of various countries on a particular country of interest in retrospect, we can do a similar analysis on current developments as well. Turkey actively participates in and influences the religious activities in Georgia by supporting youth education, building churches and religious and secular schools, publishing educational materials, funding clergy, participating in the "Madli affair"[2], lobbying for the creation of the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia, and participating in intergovernmental negotiations with Georgia on the preservation of Turkish cultural heritage, mainly mosques, in the territory of Georgia. In addition, Turkey submitted a request for the construction of a new mosque. Recently, Turkish organizations, schools, and other interested parties have started choosing talented youth and providing them with the religious education and experiences necessary to be active in public life.[3] Clearly, the Turkish government's participation and influence over the Muslim community in Georgia is growing.

Historical and Symbolic Context

Until 2010, the Muslim religious system in Georgia was distinguished by a structure established in the times of the Russian Empire[1]. The change to this structure began in 1940 when the Transcaucasia Muslim Division was reorganized as the Transcaucasia Spiritual Muslim Administration and was relocated from Baku to Tbilisi[2]. During the Soviet period, Ajarian Muslim Division, the *Muftiate*, was established in Ajara. Relying on its constitutive charter, the Ajarian Muslim Division unofficially participated in spiritual, educational, and financial activities. After the independence of Georgia in 1991, a wide educational network known as "The Weekly" – which was directly included within the Division of Georgian Muslims, a part of the Transcaucasia Spiritual Muslim Administration (also called "Samufto" for short) – became active in founding elementary schools and madrassas. "The Weekly" coexisted with the Batumi Mosque and aimed to give students comprehensive religious knowledge. A network of autonomous madrassas run by NGOs "Madli-2005," "Sada," and "Mizani" was first active in Ajara, and it later expanded to other regions of Georgia, offering students room and board and guaranteeing a good quality of religious education[3].

The issues of the construction of the Aziz mosque and the proposed site for the project are closely connected with the historical development of the location and the existing memorial sites in Batumi. The part of the city where the Aziz mosque is located represents a space with a great deal of ancient and political symbolism. Every new political regime tried to leave its own mark in this area. In the Ottoman period, for instance, the Aziz mosque stood in the proposed location together with a square named after it and the Burun-T'abie Fortification. Georgian soldiers who died fighting for the liberation of Batumi against the Ottomans during February-March of 1921 were buried in Aziz Square. During the Russian Imperial period, the Alexander Nevsky Military Cathedral was built nearby, as well as the seaside boulevard and prestigious administrative and residential buildings. New hotels and administrative buildings were placed around that area during the Soviet period and after independence[4]. Each political regime established symbols

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[2] NGO "Madli-2005" ran unregistered religious schools before it was closed due to third party ownership of their properties and concealing their activities to avoid paying taxes. "Madli affair" in this article refers to the active phase of struggles of the Muslim community and clamping down the work of the NGO.

[3] Before Turkey's involvement, Muslims of Georgia were not socially active. After the trainings provided by Turkish educational network, young Muslims in Georgia started establishing NGOs, participating in different negotiations and anti-government meetings. They started self-organizing and discussing issues of concern in social networks.

there to represent their authority and were quick to change and destroy the architectural legacies of the previous power, replacing them with their own symbols and memories. From 2004, the initiated change of this district in Batumi and the designs for the Aziz mosque were both part of Mikheil Saakashvili's "National Movement" party process of establishing symbols along with promoting its political heritage and the process of memory creation more generally[5].

The location and operation of mosques in Batumi have essentially been influenced by the historical development of the city. During the Ottoman period, together with a significant increase in the size of the city, mosques were built for Ottoman military personnel and for Georgian Muslims. In the period of the Russian Empire, together with the changes to the city's development and the make-up of its population, multiple mosques intended for the Ottoman military lost their function, and only one mosque, Ortajami, sustained its function as a religious site for Georgian Muslims. In the Soviet period, the Ortajami mosque was closed for a short time due to the policy of eliminating religion from people's lives, but it soon began operating again. With the independence, the Ortajami mosque (by then called the Batumi Mosque) became the center of the Ajarian Muftiate and gained administrative, financial, and educational functions[6]. In October 2015, the State Agency for Religious Issues purchased a new building and moved the administrative and financial functions to the new location[7].

Early Period of State Policy

During the early period of independence of Georgia, the relations between the government and the Muslim community were limited to formal recognition, with the government guaranteeing that Muslim affairs would not be interfered with and subsequently ensuring the Muslim community's political support. These arrangements allowed the government to close eyes and leave unmonitored financial sources of Muslim organizations, curricula of religious education, and qualifications of the clergy. In return, the Muslim community was a guaranteed support for the government and the legitimization of governance through elections. Relations were limited to attending public events: government officials participating in religious holidays, Muslim communities participating in pre-election meetings and taking part in elections supporting the government, and the participation of the Muslim clergy in the pro-government demonstrations in Batumi in 2004 against ex-Ajara Governor Aslan Abashidze who led the policy of separating the region from Georgia[8]. Nevertheless, Georgian Muslims constantly had problems registering organizations and property due to the absence of legal status, which influenced their financial and material activities.

Since 2004, the government of Georgia has been involved more actively with the Muslims of Georgia. Legal preconditions for creating an independent Administration of Georgian Muslims apart from the Transcaucasia Spiritual Muslim Administration were developed, the buildings of mosques were restored, and Muslim clergy were invited to public events more frequently. During these transformations, the relations with the Azerbaijani Muslims in Georgia that had been built upon the model of coexistence was sustained[9].

The Madli Affair

The first serious conflict between the government of Georgia and the Muslim community took place in 2010, following the campaign against the theological school network "Madli–2005," in which the government fined the school, confiscated the property, and arrested its leader. This was the first large-scale conflict that involved protests, the dismissal of the Mufti, and the governor of Khulo municipality since the political tensions of 1990 and in 2004 when demands for self-determination of the region were expressed. The "Madli affair" in 2010 triggered legislative

changes and, as a consequence, starting from July 5, 2011, it became possible to register religious organizations and ultimately led to the formation of the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia[10]. These processes would later become connected with the construction of the Aziz mosque. It is worth mentioning that—among all the claims the government had against the theological school—the curriculum of the school, which was by no means set by the Ministry of Education, was not brought up as an issue.

From the materials of the "Madli affair" it is clear that the state's desire to subject religious schools to the existing legislative frames, violations of religious interests, limiting young Muslims' education and religious development, dismissing the Mufti, and threats from the then-governor resulted in discontent and grew into protest actions in June-July of 2010 in Khulo.[4] The number of protests increased outside Khulo due to the involvement of people, who were resettled from overcrowded Khulo during the second part of the 20th century, but kept active contact with kinship[11]. Despite the fact that neither the opportunity for registration of religious organizations nor the legislative changes were the direct result of these protests in Khulo, they served as a triggering point for "Madli affair"[12].

The news coverage of the "Madli affair" campaign was conspicuous because of its lack of information—caused by a dearth of knowledge on the subject and the state control of the media. A few primary sources where only the clergy and the governor were able to comment on the situation were available. The subject of Islam became connected with security issues in Georgia and therefore rigid state policies were instituted. Nevertheless, it was clear that the struggle for Muslim interests in Georgia entered into an active phase with improved models and directions[13].

Legislative Changes and Mass Media

Initial legislative changes in 2011 allowed for the formation of the first Georgian Muslim Union followed by the Administration of Georgian Muslims, which was registered as a non-commercial legal entity (NCLE). The Administration of Georgian Muslims was later reorganized during 2011 into the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia. Muslim support groups, opposition groups, independent groups, and others appeared as a result as well. The process of legislative changes formed religious symbols, terminologies, and, more importantly, a range of arguments. Controversies in the issue preconditioned the consolidation of parties of interest.

Nevertheless, the legislative changes created an opportunity for the development of the Muslim community and the gaining of relevant knowledge and functional advancement. This was followed by an increase in attention from the mass media, which closely observed the Muslim community and noted many of its specificities, often mentioning Muslims in informational statements. Leaders of Muslim organizations, Muslim theologists, and social activists were often invited as part of an expert panel and gave their views about Islam and Georgian Muslims. Moreover, the legislative changes triggered utilization of new instruments that became a conduit to expressing protests and managing processes by means of social media.

While social media became an active instrument for social mobilization in different countries, in Georgia this instrument first found its place among religious groups and their supporters. In the Georgian social network history, the utilization of social media by the Muslim community and other religious groups was one of the first cases of organizing groups for a specific action. The power of social media was seen when the church organized thousands-strong demonstrations of Orthodox Christians in response to legislative changes, exceeding even the expectations of or-

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[4] Khulo is mainly populated with Georgian Muslims.

ganizers. In the following period, organizing demonstrations, reacting and making evaluations by means of social networks, turned into an obligatory character. Every group carefully observed the activities of like-minded people online, as well as their opponents, and reacted accordingly. People reacted to subjects not only in analytical or informative articles, blogs, comments, but also to comprehensive media pieces about certain historical events or personalities prepared by experts. Generally, after the fall of the Soviet Union, understanding Georgian history and discussing and sharing viewpoints gained special relevance and the space provided by the Internet afforded each individual a unique chance to write their own views about past or current events, and to present their own attitudes and descriptions of historical processes[14].

The arguments against these legislative reforms—changes that would give greater recognition to religious minorities, such as Muslims, Catholics, Gregorians, Jews, Baptists, and others—appealed to the Christian majority of the country. The arguments made against a background of growing social activity and protest movements were met with a significant response from the local society and were fueled by authoritative institutes and patriarchies who expressed concern about possible dangers to the dominant role of the church[15]. The opponents reasoned that, if the demands of the Muslims were met, the future of Georgia and its Orthodox church would be under threat[16].

Members of the political regime appeared to support the legislative changes[17]. The supporters regarded the process as a natural western-style development where religious freedom and equality were a priority and guaranteed. At the same time, political opponents and lawyers brought up the supposed procedural and organizational problems if the legislative bill was to be adopted. The opponents claimed that the existing social, political, ethnic, and religious hierarchy could be maintained only if the bill was defeated. This struggle loomed for them as the only way to defend the identity and independence of the country and the nation. The main watershed of their conflict concerned the rights of Orthodoxy and the church. Opponents discussed national problems, the nation's self-determination and survival, prospects for the development of the state, as well as individual and collective choices by using traditional and modernistic ideologies[18].

Administration of Muslims of All Georgia

The "Madli affair" and legislative changes were followed by the creation of the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia. For the government of Georgia it was a priority to place all religious organizations within a legal framework that would ensure their compliance with the then-existing regulations. Until the formation of the administration, various domestic Muslim organizations influenced by foreign organizations attempted to assert and promote their own interests. The clergy and government officials reasoned that the administration would give a greater opportunity for Muslims to integrate, improve organizational and financial activities, and generally ease the burdens of Georgian Muslims. Ultimately, the clergy and government officials drafted a new policy on religion. Despite this, in the opinion of the Muslim clergy, the contradictions linked to an owner of the Aziz mosque and the expenses for its construction remained a problem[19].

Among the opponents to the creation of the administration were the Azerbaijani Muslim organizations and a young clergy of Georgian Muslims. The latter viewed the creation of the new administration negatively due to the fear of being ignored from the process and the supposed increase in government intervention. Prior to the legislative changes and the consequent registration of the administration, the Georgian Muslim community was considered a diaspora organization within the Azerbaijani Muslim organizations. However, Georgian Muslims were distinguished by the step-like structure of their management and functional organization principles.

Georgian Muslims also provided mosques and organizations with more autonomy.

The relations of Muslim organizations with the state bore an official character after the legislative changes and the creation of the administration, but at the same time, relations with politicians and parties (especially with the ruling party) remained unchanged; Muslim leaders were invited to attend official events only, which helped to create relations and trust for the support of a particular political group during elections. In parallel, a large group of opponents emerged. One party, created with the support of Azerbaijan, stood out for its active protest, perhaps conditioned by the humiliation of its interests in light of losing clout among Georgian Muslims. The party considered the decrease of Azerbaijan's influence and downplayed the role of the Transcaucasia Spiritual Muslim Administration by impeding the creation of a separate administration. This situation was met with an active campaign and the creation of parallel entities by Azerbaijani Muslim organizations. At the same time, Georgian Muslims expressed dissatisfaction with the administration as well, insisting that the Christian founders and politicians of the organization were not to be trusted, and the degree of state intervention was unacceptable. The dissatisfaction of specific Muslim groups, in other words, was due to their being ignored in the process of the administration's creation and their removal from leadership and founder roles.

New Mosque for Batumi

In parallel with the "Madli affair," the legislative changes, and the registration processes for the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia, the issue of constructing the new mosque (Aziz mosque) in Batumi arose in 2010. Interested parties were also attempting to define the purpose of the mosque; will it be a place to accommodate an increasing number of Muslims in Batumi, a new place for Muslims, an educational and cultural center, or a center of opposing Muslim parties? Several years prior to these processes, negotiations took place between the Georgian and Turkish governments on restoration works of the Georgian and Turkish cultural heritage sites in each other's territories. Muslim leaders were interested in the idea of constructing a new mosque and were positive about undertaking the project, but as the materials indicate, however, they were not involved in the process.[20]

Before the processes of negotiations on the Aziz mosque began, and before the mosque became the forefront of public attention, the consolidation of opponents, supporters, and officials took place.[21] Parties interested in the issue formed a set of arguments that contained the symbolic, emotional, and political context that would explain their stance on the issue of Georgian Muslims. During the regional, parliamentarian, and presidential elections in 2012, the subject of the Aziz mosque turned into a central issue of the political struggle of Georgian Muslims.

Ongoing processes to oppose the Aziz mosque found an important echo in a demonstration held by the opposition in Batumi on March 20, 2012. Representatives of religious, political, and public unions who opposed the construction appeared to instigate this demonstration and used the Internet to spread the necessary information.[22]

For the church, this was a personal and institutional protest against the government's policy, and patriots joined to defend national symbols that included identity, Christianity, and traditions. Church participation was viewed as a source of the legitimization of protests and its organizers. The fact that the location of the Aziz mosque was given a specific sacred meaning, whereas the government had denied the stance of religious institutions that were opposing the construction of the mosques, proved an important action to imbue this physical space with social meanings and taboos. The symbolic representation of the Aziz mosque location is out of the range of the Orthodox discourse because the location encompasses other non-religious values,

such as secularism, nation building, national history, military past and military honor, occupation, the enemy icon, and the sociocultural protest of the nation. Therefore, from the beginning, the protest did not have a dimension of religious character; rather, it was the protest of defenders of the national idea that protected Christianity, Christian traditions, and culture. That is why the encroachment to the national idea—which was not allowed to change—gave the Christian believers (in a broad sense – society) a legitimate moral, sacral, political, historical, cultural, and national right of large-scale protest and anti-government resistance.

The place where the Aziz mosque was located in Batumi represented the historical center of the city and had been the location for many historical events, among which the battle against Turkey and the invasion of 1921 are particularly significant. Due to the symbolic and historical meaning of the site, the demonstrations held there were bound to divide supporters and opponents of national interests. The demonstrators demanded to be able to place crosses on graves of those who died, offer commemorative prayers, and stop the construction of the Aziz mosque. Due to the characteristics of the place, the demonstration was described as a struggle for the protection of national interests.

The demonstration was directed towards performing religious rituals, the expression of social protest, and the revival of patriotic rhetoric at a place of specific historical memory. During the demonstration, a semantically vague dichotomy arose concerning the defense of national honor, which divided people into "ours" ("we") and "theirs" ("they"), and each interested party had their own view of who represented "ours" and "theirs"—the understanding of which required an appeal to common forms of essentialist patriotism and their symbolic protection. That is why the participation of parties, organizations, or individuals aimed at showing that they were a part of and creators of this discourse, rather than simply expressing their own opinions and protesting. In the process of Muslim groups' participation in demonstrations, a legitimate model of "a Georgian Muslim" emerged who was familiar with their history, understood their own place in the national model of social interaction, and had aspirations towards becoming an ideal Georgian, replete with national values. For politicians, the demonstrations were instrumental in criticizing the government, while for the non-political participants it represented an illusion of equal-participation, the real aim of which was the protection of national interests.[23]

Position of the Officials

Despite the community's increasing interest, opponents and experts expressed their opinions in the absence of any official information. The government's concealment of information was viewed as a coup for the opposition and a perfect opportunity to promote their arguments. For the most part, official statements only showed a general picture and in fact made the government a slave to its own statements. The government expressed full confidence in leading the negotiations and continuously assured the community that they would be able to accomplish negotiation points. Involvement of the church and Muslim communities, who within themselves were split about the idea of the creation of the administration, caused varying opinions and resulted in constant changes and issues with signing the agreement. Publicizing information about the negotiations on the restoration of churches in Turkey and mosques in Georgia was disrupted by the lack of information. The ruling National Movement party did not want to include all parties in the negotiations because it did not have the final text of the agreement or involvement strategy and was interested in receiving credits for ongoing negotiations.[24]

Government officials publicly stated the need for negotiations and the accomplishment of the project, emphasizing the bad conditions of churches in Turkey and the historical mission of the ruling party to save them. The essential parts of official texts show that members of the political

regime used statements and comments of autocratic nature with the message that the leader of the nation knows what is best for everyone[25].

According to published materials, one of the factors hindering the plans for the restoration projects was the Patriarchy's disagreement. The fact that the Church had serious support from society forced the state to reach an agreement with the Patriarchy by assigning it the role of a higher religious arbiter. Under these conditions, the authors of the project hoped to receive the desired support to carry it out, but their expectations were not met[26].

The Turkish side gave significance to the agreement and saw its fulfillment as a major prospect for future collaborations. For them, the construction of the mosque was the main part of the agreement[27].

At the same time, the Georgian government actively tried to show society the main political, symbolic, and emotional results that could be achieved by bringing a successful conclusion to the negotiations. With the goal of forming a supportive public, media sources shaped public opinion by means of symbols, emotions, and appeals to national values. The TV media sources were mainly on the side of the ruling party, given that they were under its control, while online media published opposite opinions. Information was spread about the dangers threatening Georgian cultural heritage on the Turkish territory. In the government's opinion, opposition parties were not ready to take responsibility for the control of the heritage restoration project and build a mosque in Batumi.[28] However, the opposition's position would result in demonstrations, the consolidation of opponents, and the loss of part of the electorate for the government.

Positions of the Opposition

Many of the statements made in social networks consisted of paraphrases and subjective assertions of previously disseminated information in the mass media, sources of which were often doubtful. Arguments by politicians opposed to the negotiation process and the construction of the mosque shared a number of characteristics, including that their statements were issued by organizations active in Batumi or by regional politicians in Ajara. The regional aspect of the issue was conditioned not only by the location of the Aziz mosque, but also by the prospects of self-advancement of certain regional politicians ahead of the parliamentary elections in 2012.[29]

Opposition politicians used the information vacuum for their own purposes and disseminated their desired assertions and accusations. These included accusations related to the content of the negotiations, as they considered the project itself to be a betrayal of national interests, and they created favorable conditions for opponents of the mosque's construction to act. For the opponents, the project was steeped in religious politics, and it contradicted national and state interests. Moreover, it represented a stance against the interests of the country's majority religious group, namely the Georgian Orthodox Christians. In their opinion, the project was against the interests of Batumi residents, including the interests of Muslims. Such political comments were mainly addressed to voters and were made in easily understandable and colloquial language.[30]

The subject of the Aziz mosque was followed by personal and party conflicts, during which it became clear that public opinion was formed on the basis of insufficient information, fears, and politicians' own presumptions. This contributed, in turn, to the consolidation of a group of opponents of the process and the formation of a system of arguments and counter-arguments. Opponents used the criticism cited above on matters of agreement and the construction of the mosque to attract voters.[31]

During this process, groups and individuals that shared neither the state's position nor that of the opposition—a so called independent group—appeared. The independent group's arguments were: Georgian Muslims are a part of the Georgian identity and the mosque should be constructed if they want it; Turkey is an important trading partner and strategic partner and good relations should be sustained; and anyone who has an opinion about building the mosque should be a part of the negotiation process. The independent group had support neither from the state nor from the opposition political groups, and their arguments proved unacceptable to the broad section of society.

In this political struggle, opposition politicians (especially the politicians from Batumi, who were a part of a new coalition, "Georgian Dream") were no more hesitant about spreading their considerations on issues of agreement and construction or restoration of cultural heritage in Georgia than they were about criticizing the country's overall political situation. Another crucial element concerns the fact that they tried to promote a range of emotional, symbolic, and political values, on the basis of which voters would have been able to identify and choose positions and make a choice accordingly. From 2012 on, it became important for politicians to ensure recognizability, so they paid attention to the frequency and content of their own statements in the mass media. Notable here was the tendency of politicians to state that they were expressing the needs of citizens or different groups such as writers, academic circles, parishioners, and others. As a result, one of the figures of this local political group later became one of the leaders of the new political coalition, "Georgian Dream," which won the 2012 parliamentary elections.[32]

Experts Points of View

Experts who did not belong to any political party or to the government expressed opinions on the issue and, unlike politicians, opinions issued by experts were more convincing, insofar as they supported their views with certain sources, documents, analyses, or their own expertise. Arguments in support and those against were distinguished by their diversity and content.[33]

Opposing experts devoted a significant space in their comments to the threats and directed the society to attend to the important challenges and possible problems that might ensue after the completion of the negotiations and construction of the Aziz mosque. These arguments were used by all groups, especially politicians. Politicians tended to use patriotic and populist segments of expert opinions along with "official" and "accepted" versions of history as far as it supported the agendas of opposition parties.

Experts linked the problem of Islamization with other issues, including the independent religious education system, youth activities when gaining religious education, Turkish investments, and so on. According to their opinions, such processes have led to a complicated ethno-religious picture in the region, which supposedly disrupted the mono-ethnic confessional situation. These experts often also considered religious education abroad to be a problem, particularly in Turkey, since they thought it would be followed by changes in the lingual, social, cultural and political views of the youth.[34]

Expert views in support of the negotiation process adopted a stance largely similar to that of the government, and these views were aimed at justifying the government's positions. Unlike the government, however, their positions were public and had specific details and ensured the dissemination of specific sources and materials. The experts in favor dealt with opponents' criticisms, mainly represented by the Patriarchy, and provided the society with arguments to counter them. An important aspect of these counter-arguments dwelled on the damage to the mon-

uments of Tao-klarjeti, located in the territory of Turkey. Most authors claimed that the construction of the mosque would not be a problem for a developed society since the practice of a mosque construction was widespread in Georgia. However, a large part of these experts worked in Tbilisi and, for this reason, their considerations did not include the fears and threats that were claimed at the regional level.[35]

Some experts put forward a constructive position regarding the Aziz mosque and other accompanying issues. Their logic differed significantly from the 'pro and against' experts and, as a result, were subject to criticism from both the public at large and other interested parties. Experts questioned the assignment of hereditary characteristics and immutable and specific qualities to ethnic groups and political unions. Experts considered this attitude towards religious groups to be biased and unfavorable where the issue of building the mosque was politicized in a society with a history of coexistence of different religious groups. If the Georgian society considered the construction of the mosques to be political, culturally expansionary, or as projects of foreign countries, the wish of the Georgian side to restore the church activities on the territory of Turkey would be deemed as a problem by the Turkish side as well. The experts reasoned that the mosque's construction and the activities of the Islamic Education center would not impact the society's outlook; however, what would negatively impact it is the non-constructive position of the government and the local stakeholders[36].

Outcomes of the Aziz Mosque Issue

So, what was the outcome of the Aziz mosque issue? The "Georgian Dream" political coalition won the 2012 parliamentary elections, the composition of which included opponents to the mosque. No distinct outcomes followed either in terms of making the negotiations public or of making the information about the Aziz mosque more transparent. Although the supporters and opponents that emerged during the process of the Aziz mosque maintained their rhetoric, their composition has been changing with more people joining the 'either' group.

Supporters of the new mosque construction often mentioned that the Batumi Ortajami mosque was overloaded on Fridays and during mass prayers because of the increase in parish. People had to use the yard and the adjacent street to pray and thus requested another mosque in the city. This argument was shared by certain politicians, experts, and political parties. The government representatives expressed heterogeneous attitudes towards this argument. Neither side, however, mentioned that new mosques were added to the expanded territory of Batumi as greater parts of Angisa, Gonio, Akhalsofeli, Charnali, Khelvachauri, Pheria, Akhalsheni, Chakvi, Erge, Tsinsvla, Chelti, and Khek'ru became a part of Batumi. The protest on the Azerbaijani side—afraid to lose their historical influence and especially of the Caucasus Spiritual Muslim Administration located in Baku, which followed the creation of the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia—later became the cause of reorganization of the administration in 2014. Azerbaijani Muslims of Georgia were represented by the Sunni Mufti, Iasan Aliev, who was the Mufti of East Georgia, and a new Sheikh, Ramin Idogov. The Georgian Muslims were placed under western Georgian Mufti, Jemal Pasqadze.

Conclusions

First, the traditional mass media tools (newspaper, radio, television) were gradually replaced with electronic media and social networks within these political and social processes that gave more social space and increased the possibility for self-determination. The fact that any interested individual could independently publish an article, write a comment, or, depending on their own education and experience, produce a blog caused an expansion of possibilities in the new

space. As a result, the details of negotiations regarding the restoration of cultural heritage monuments became not only a focus of electronic media, but also the determiner and catalyst of interconnected processes. The possibilities opened up by social networks (mainly Facebook) were demonstrated by several protests and informational campaigns where the number of participants exceeded even the organizers' expectations.

Second, the processes surrounding the Sultan Abdul-Aziz mosque revealed how the influence and role of authoritative religious institutions are important in Georgian political reality. The Patriarchy is the most influential institution in Georgia with the highest trust ratings in the country. Every active political subject in Georgia attempted to take part in the events surrounding the Patriarchy. In particular, if government representatives were trying to protect the interests of minority religious groups, such as Muslims, within their public speeches or comments, in parallel they gave significant attention to church funding and provided further support. To accomplish projects and reduce public resistance, the government officials tried to have consultations with the Patriarchy representatives first and make the results of these meetings public, which represented democratic and liberal values in action.

Third, a major part of political opponents' policy was directed toward protecting the interests of the church. At the same time, protecting the interests of the dominant religious group was mainly identified with subjects of national values, identity, and sovereignty. That is why the opponents' rhetoric mainly carried a patriotic, mono-ethno-centric or populist character.

Fourth, traditions of hostility, created and fostered in the Soviet period, pushed Georgian society toward a constant search for friends and enemies. This tendency found its expression in school textbooks, history studies, and in positive or negative characters in literature. On the other hand, these characters were developed in educational curricula and social interactions to create a wide range of social phobias, which have come to make up a significant aspect of modern Georgian society; these factors remain the most important part of the partisan and ideological nature of social groups and political subjects in the country.

Fifth, during the discussions on the Aziz mosque, the mass media and parties of interest actively used expert opinions to support their own arguments. But the experts themselves showed a certain partisanship since their arguments either repeated the position of government representatives or were close to the positions of their political opponents. At the same time, the online materials of the Aziz mosque indicated that experts gave more details and supported them with a variety of sources. Because of this, their arguments were more convincing, and they were integrated into the arguments of political opponents.

Sixth, with the creation of the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia and in the process of their further transformation, the government aimed to control and guarantee a managed organizational structure of Muslim organizations or religious organizations in general. At the same time, the government did not attempt to draw up regulations and legal norms to provide greater transparency, standardization (especially in the educational system) and independence in the activities of Muslim organizations. Therefore, discussions of mosque construction took place without inputs from the Muslim organizations and religious leaders. At the same time, Muslim religious leaders chose to give their opinions in a rather diplomatic way – their aim being to support the integrity of the state and the public.

Seventh, the creation of an independent Muslim organization, the Administration of Muslims of All Georgia, was not followed either by the formation of a unified and strong institution or by decreasing the protest of Azerbaijani organizations or influential people; on the other hand, it

drew resistance from the clergy and young Georgian Muslim theologians. Therefore, the project of Muslim community consolidation and its integration within social-political processes failed.

Eighth, the interested parties and the make-up of groups of supporters and opponents continued playing a role in the field of arguments created around the Aziz mosque after the 2012 parliamentarian elections, which was manifested in different processes connected with the Muslim community. Due to the political transformations of the pre-election period, arguments coming from certain parts of the government supported the formation and maintaining of the mono-ethnic and mono-religious status quo, and those who challenged them were the ones who tended to favor the principle of equality that determined western values. However, the positions of the new government mistakenly repeated the religious policy elements of the previous one where the government reacted improperly in order not to upset its own supporters as well as any religious groups, and relations with the interested parties of religious matters were often conducted using indirect or inadequate methods.

That is why the regulation of localized interethnic conflicts, such as those that took place after 2012 in Tsikhisdziri, Nigvziani, Chela, and Kobuleti, was undertaken at the level of the Patriarchy and of the Administration of All Muslims of Georgia; the government's aim was to conserve the established processes due to unclear politics or to manage them unofficially, though in doing so, the government supported the creation of a broad field of opponents armed with solid arguments. The political opposition, while it criticized the ongoing processes, mainly discussed the ideological and instrumental problems that were conditioned by the existence of the government-opposition in Georgia. At the same time, neither the opposition nor the government attempted to manage the legal, organizational, informative, or regulative problems connected with the existence of religious groups. The religious community, despite these changes, is mostly considered a resource for various elections. The arguments and positions that were consolidated around the issue of the construction of the Aziz mosque by politicians, experts, and interested groups were basically spread through online media. New forms of communication had an important influence on social, political, and religious processes. This worked to create a specific discourse about Muslims and Muslim organizations in Georgia. As a result, it changed state religious policy, the Muslim community, and had an influence on ongoing political processes.

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