

**‘Adjarians, you are Georgians too’: Religion, Nationalism, and Ethnicity in the Framing of Georgia’s European Identity**

By: Jessica Marie Preston

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Supervisor: Professor Matteo Fumagalli

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## **Abstract**

The number of religious freedom violations towards Muslims has increased in the Republic of Georgia since 2012. This thesis examines the oppression of the Georgian Muslim community in the Adjara region. Using a frame analysis, I examine the Georgian elites framing of historical narratives, national symbols, Georgian national identity, and Georgian European identity. I find that elites have framed Christianity as exclusively linked to Georgia's national and European identity, while also 'othering' Islam. Interviews uncovered systematic oppression by the Georgian state. Furthermore, Georgian society is justifying their religious freedom violations towards Georgian Muslims by denying their self-identification as being ethnically Georgian.

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## Introduction

### Motivation

While living and teaching in Adjara, Republic of Georgia during the academic year of 2014/15, I was able to experience Georgian identity conflict first hand. This aspect of Georgian life became apparent while I was giving a lesson on holidays to a mixed group of students, both Muslim and Orthodox Christian. I asked the students to tell me about the major holidays in their country. One student raised her hand and told me about Christmas, Easter, and the New Year. Another student raised her hand and started to tell me about Ramadan. In the midst of her struggling to find the English words to explain her holiday, another student very sternly interrupted her, “That’s not Georgian!” The Muslim girl was silenced and looked down at her books. I asked the class, “But she speaks Georgian, she is Georgian. How is her holiday not Georgian?” The girl who interrupted replied, “Because Muslims are not Georgian.”

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After the fall of the Soviet Union, many scholars have observed and recorded a religious revival taking place in the former 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 is meant to be a person from that nation; this included being a certain ethnicity, speaking a certain language, identifying with a certain religion, and opposing an ‘Other’. Specifically, Georgians defined themselves as ethnically Georgian, Georgian speaking, and Orthodox Christian, and defined the ‘Other’ as Islam and Communism. The nationalist mobilization that happened in many parts of the USSR before the collapse, succeeded in fueling national pride, but also alienated minorities within the countries. In recent scholarship, the Republic of Georgia’s minorities are normally limited to discussion about 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. The term “Georgian Muslim” has been rejected by a majority of the Georgian population.<sup>1</sup> This comes from the idea that Georgian Orthodox Christianity is inseparable from Georgian ethnic identity.<sup>2</sup> Georgia is just one of many countries which oppresses religious minorities, but recent data has shown that violations of religious freedom, especially towards Muslims, has increased in Georgia since 2012.<sup>3</sup> What accounts for this increase in religious violations towards Muslims in Georgia?

In this thesis I argue that the increase in violations towards Muslims in Georgia is an attempt by the Georgian Orthodox majority to protect their national Christian identity, as well as maintain their ‘European identity’. Using a frame analysis, I will highlight how the Georgian political elite framed and constructed Georgian Orthodox and Georgian European identity, then examine how these identities have led to an increase in ‘othering’ of the Georgian Muslim community.

Georgia is currently going through a process of ‘Europeanization’, in this case getting closer to the EU through institutional changes. Much of this process includes the creation and reinforcement of Georgia’s affinity with Europe. Scholars have examined how Georgia attempts to align itself with Europe, through claiming they have ‘European values’.<sup>4</sup> These values include democracy, freedom, and human rights, but there is also a significant religious element to Georgia’s perceived connection to Europe. As Georgia is actively trying to stake its claim in Europe, they are frequently placed or

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<sup>1</sup> Khalvashi, Tamta, and Nutsa Batiashvili. “Can Muslim Be a Georgian?” Historic Overview of Discourse on Georgian ‘Essence.” University of Georgia, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Crego, Paul. “Religion and Nationalism in Georgia.” *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 14, no. 3 (1994). <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1847&context=ree>.

<sup>3</sup> “Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in Georgia Progress in 2014 and Recommendations for Actions.” Brussels, Belgium: European Commission, March 25, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> German, “Heading West? Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic path”; Kakachia and Minesashvili, “Identity politics: Exploring Georgian foreign policy behavior”; Donnacha Ó Beacháin & Frederik Coene, “Go West: Georgia’s European Identity and its Role in Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy Objectives”; Mestvirishvili and Mestvirishvili, “I am Georgian and therefore I am European”.

identified as being part of Central Asia or the Middle East. Georgian elite refuse this classification and insist Georgia is an ancient and perhaps the oldest European nation.<sup>5</sup> They do this by stating that Georgia was one of the first European countries to adopt Christianity, therefore cementing their European heritage and their claim to having ‘European values’, while also differentiating themselves from Muslim Central Asia and the Middle East. However, this reinforcement of Christian identity by Georgian elites is not only creating a ‘European identity’, but also uniting the Georgian Orthodox community against religious minorities which is leading to increased tensions and religious violations, especially against Muslim minorities.

I take a constructivist approach in this thesis, therefore I do not view Georgia as being inherently Christian or indisputably European. In this thesis I will examine how the Georgian elite have framed Georgian identity, disseminated these frames among Georgian society through political rhetoric and media, and then how these frames have been used to mobilize the Georgian Orthodox majority against the Georgian Muslim minority.

One may assume that further Europeanization of a country leads to an improved status of minority rights, but it can be observed through several EU accessions that this is not the case. In fact, most countries which have already underwent EU accession did not fully implement their minority rights protection measures until very late in the accession process. Also, some minority groups were treated differently than others within the EU’s accession criteria.<sup>6</sup> As the EU is currently experiencing ‘enlargement fatigue’, it has been announced that there will not be another enlargement until after

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<sup>5</sup> Donnacha Ó Beacháin & Frederik Coene, “Go West: Georgia’s European Identity and its Role in Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy Objectives” *Nationalities Papers* <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2014.953466>

<sup>6</sup> Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier, *Europeanization of Central and Eastern Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

2020. Even then, Georgia is still very far off from being accepted as a candidate country. Therefore, just because Georgia is currently experiencing Europeanization, it can not be assumed that there will be an obvious improvement in minority rights. That being the case, in this thesis I am not concerned with why Europeanization is not improving the rights of religious minorities. When it comes to Europe, I am solely focused on how Georgia's perception of Europe and their place within it, is contributing to the increased violations of religious freedom in Georgia.

In this thesis I argue that Georgian 'European identity' is tied directly to their Christian heritage. The Christian European identity is framed by the Georgian elites and reproduced by the majority of the Georgian population. Georgians are reinforcing and reproducing their Christian identity in order to validate their claim as being a European country. Joining the EU is Georgia's top foreign policy priority because their Euro-Atlantic integration is viewed as ensuring their sovereignty as an independent nation.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, in the Georgian perception, maintaining Christian 'European identity' and differentiating themselves from the Islamic Middle East and Central Asia is one of the most important components of Georgian identity framing today. This reinforcement of Georgian European/Christian identity leads Georgians to believe that any threat to this Christian identity is a threat to the livelihood of their nation, which leads to alienation of Muslim religious minorities, especially those who self-identify as Georgian.

This thesis will contribute to literature on identity framing, specifically the effects of the European identity formation through examining the current status of religious minorities in Georgia. This research will attempt to illustrate the extent that the reinforcement of European identity connected to Christianity in Georgia is fueling religious intolerance of Georgian Muslims in the Adjara region.

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<sup>7</sup> German, T. (2015) "Heading West? Georgia's Euro-Atlantic Path" *International Affairs* p 601-614



For the empirical part of this thesis I have conducted semi-structured interviews with academics who are currently doing research on the Georgian Muslim community, as well as a legal NGO in Tbilisi which is working to protect the rights of marginalized groups in Georgia. These interviews, plus a year spent living and working in the Adjara region provided me with the background necessary to analyze the current situation of the Georgian Muslim minority in the Adjara region.

This thesis is not meant to be critical of Georgian society, but rather a way to explain how the framing of ‘Georgianness’ is contributing to marginalization of the Georgian Muslim community. Marginalization of minority groups in Georgia has been the biggest source of instability in the country over the past two decades, as it has led to radicalization and mobilization of other minority groups, such as the Abkhaz and the South Ossetians. Uncovering the reasons behind discrimination of minorities can lead to more self-awareness by the majority population, and hopefully contribute to stability in the region.

Furthermore, Georgia is not the only country which is attributing Christianity to European values. The current contestation of European values within the European Union by countries such as Hungary and Poland, in which religion is coming to the forefront of the controversy of the refugee crisis, can easily draw parallels to the situation in the Republic of Georgia right now. Some of the findings in this thesis could shed light on the reason for the most recent revival of the Christian identity in Europe, and the ‘othering’ of Islam.

I will begin by giving a historical narrative of the Georgian Christian identity formation and how the Georgian Muslim population diverted from this path, therefore forming their own Georgian identity without a Christian component. Then I will discuss Georgia’s formation of their European self-identity and how Georgia’s foreign policy priority of deepening their ties with the EU, actively contributes to their intolerance towards Muslim minorities. Lastly, empirical data that I uncovered

through interviews will be analyzed in order to see the real impact the aforementioned identity frames are having on the Georgian Muslim community.

### Historical Context

#### Georgia

Georgian Orthodox people proudly claim Georgia was one of the first countries to adopt Christianity as an official religion. Christianity arrived in Georgia in the 4<sup>th</sup> 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 most famous saints in Georgia. Shortly afterwards, churches started to become a part of the Georgian landscape. Suny states in *The Making of a Georgian Nation* that Christianity influenced the formation of unity among Georgian people.<sup>8</sup> 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 Christian. Georgian historical narrative frames the Georgian nation as a protector of their Christian identity against Islamic invaders.<sup>9</sup>

#### Adjara

Georgia is made up of 12 administrative regions, all of which have distinctive characteristics from one another. One region in south western Georgia, Adjara, is a particularly unique region (*See Appendix 1*). Adjara shares a border with Turkey, and is well-known for its beautiful Black Sea coastline.

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<sup>8</sup> Ronald Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> 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>.

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 and migrated to present-day Turkey. Also, many Georgian Muslims stayed and became faithful to the Russian Empire, because they felt it was a chance at reunification with their Georgian heritage.<sup>10</sup> Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Russia tried to win over the Georgian Muslims by ending policies that encouraged migration and financed the building of mosques in the Adjara region. The push for Christianization in the region also was ineffective. Although there was a religious difference, most Muslims in Adjara continued to identify as Georgian.<sup>11</sup> During the First World War the “Committee for the Liberation of Muslim Georgia” was formed in Tbilisi to try to pull Georgian Muslims out of Turkish influence.<sup>12</sup> When the Communist authorities entered the region and the threat to religious practices became apparent, three different perspectives for Adjara emerged. One was to reunite with Turkey, the second was to break off and form an independent Adjarian state, and the third was to return to 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

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<sup>10</sup> 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>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

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.”<sup>13</sup>

In 1921 under the Treaty of Kars, the region of Adjara was reunited with Soviet Georgia. In this treaty Turkey stipulated that Adjara must have the status of an autonomous region, in order to protect the Muslim people there. This differs from the reason for autonomy that was granted to Abkhazia within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Abkhaz autonomy was based on ethnic, linguistic, and cultural difference from Georgia, while Adjara’s autonomy was based solely on religion. After Adjara was reunited with Georgia under autonomous status the Soviet Union suppressed all religion. Therefore, during the Soviet times Muslim and Orthodox Georgians saw little difference amongst themselves, especially after 1926 when the Adjarian ethnic group was removed from the census and they were officially recognized as ethnic Georgians. Official autonomy still remains in Adjara today, but its actual power of autonomy can be questioned.<sup>14</sup>

The *glasnost* policies at the end of the Soviet Union created an atmosphere which stirred a nationalist mobilization in many Soviet states, including Georgia. A wave of ethnic nationalism coupled with a religious revival became very apparent with the growing power of the Georgian Orthodox Church at this time.<sup>15</sup> Georgian elites who were speaking against the Soviet Union and for

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 5

<sup>14</sup> What does Adjara’s autonomous status mean today? Kordell and Wolff (2010) mention autonomy as a solution for managing conflict. In the case of Adjara, there is a functioning Government of Autonomous Adjara, but its true autonomy can be questioned because their *de facto* autonomous status has been deteriorating since 2004. The Adjarian Government works mostly under the strict supervision of the Georgian Central Government. In addition, recent decisions by the Adjarian government have shown that they are not actively protecting the interests of the Muslim population in Adjara. This can be seen in the August 2014 decision in which the Autonomous Government blocked the construction of a new mosque in Batumi.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the Autonomous Government of Adjara is functioning, but it is not acting as it was originally intended to, which was to protect the Muslim religious minority. Adjara’s autonomous status will not be viewed as a tool for settling conflict, as Kordell and Wolff refer to.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Wheatley, *Georgia From National Awakening to Rose Revolution* (Burlington, VT USA: Ashgate Publishing, 2005).

Georgian independence based much of their rhetoric on restoring the Georgian Orthodox faith in Georgia. Not only did Georgian Orthodoxy reemerge full force, but other religions including Islam started to become visible as well.

The historical context of Georgia and the Adjara region is important background information which will contribute to the understanding of this thesis. I will now turn to the theoretical framework and the conceptualization of terms.

## **Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework and Conceptualization**

### Frame Analysis

Frame analysis is used as a tool to understand how people interpret and frame certain social situations. Erving Goffman is credited with creating this approach to analysis. He distinguishes two primary frameworks in which people use to understand their surroundings and the situations they encounter. He outlines ‘the natural’ framework and ‘the social’ framework. In this thesis I am concerned with the social framework, which “provide[s] background understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of intelligence, a live agency, the chief one being the human being”<sup>16</sup>

Frame analysis is often times used to examine social movements and how certain events are framed in order to lead to mobilization. As this thesis is not concerned with mobilization per se, it is concerned with group identity and ‘othering’ of minority groups. Drawing from the broader literature on frame analysis, Identity Frames provide a structure for examining how people place themselves within various conflicts based on their self and collective identity. To describe a frame in the simplest terms the metaphor of a picture frame can be used. All of the things inside the frame are important, while everything outside of the frame is less important. Snow and Benford (1988) describe a frame as “an interpretive schema that simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of action.”<sup>17</sup> The frame itself “identifies a problem that is social or political in nature, the parties responsible for causing the

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<sup>16</sup> Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis* (Boston, MA, USA: Northeastern University Press, 1974). 22

<sup>17</sup> David Snow and Robert Benford, “Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization,” *International Social Movement Research: From Structure to Action*, 1988, 137.

problem, and a solution.”<sup>18</sup> These frames are constructed by what Johnston and Noakes (2005) call “social entrepreneurs”. Although no one person can fully control the framing process, these social entrepreneurs or ‘frame-makers’ as I will refer to them in this thesis, they are crucial in building and disseminating the frames.

In order for frame-makers to be successful they must “find evocative cultural symbols that resonate with potential constituents.”<sup>19</sup> The frames produced by the frame-makers must resonate with the society in which they are disseminating the frames to. This can be done in three ways: 1) having a credible and/or charismatic frame-maker 2) being directed towards the ideological, demographic, or moral orientations of the receivers of the frame and 3) the frame must have one or more of the qualities - cultural compatibility, narrative fidelity, frame consistency, and empirical credibility.<sup>20</sup>

This approach provides a valuable structure for examining how the Georgian Muslim minority group has been framed by Georgian elites through the formation of an exclusive national identity, and the perception of Georgia’s ‘Europeanness’. This will be done by examining ethnicity and identity formation, nationalism, historical narratives, symbols, and elite rhetoric, which contribute to the framing of Muslim ‘others’ in the historical and contemporary society of Georgia. I will also identify the dominant ‘frame-makers’ that have constructed and disseminated these frames. As it is important to understand how these frames work in various contexts, I will now move on to conceptualize terms which will be helpful for understanding the entirety of this thesis.

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<sup>18</sup> Hank Johnston and John A. Noakes, *Frames of Protest* (New York, NY USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2005). 5

<sup>19</sup> Stephan Valocchi, “Collective Action Frames in The Gay Liberation Movement, 1969-1973,” in *Frames of Protest* (New York, NY USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2005). 54

<sup>20</sup> Hank Johnston and John A. Noakes, *Frames of Protest* (New York, NY USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2005). 13

## 1.2 Nationalism and Religion

As stated earlier in this thesis, Georgia went through a period of redefining or reviving their national identity in the late 1980s and early 1990s as the Soviet Union began to collapse. This identity formation (or reformation) was characterized by ethnic, linguistic, and religious nationalism. As this thesis is firstly focused on religion's place in identity formation, I will first outline the connection between religion and nationalism. Rogers Brubaker outlines four approaches to studying the relationship between religion and nationalism in which I pick out "religion as imbricated or intertwined with nationalism" as the most appropriate for the case of Georgian nationalism. This approach suggests that religion is an intrinsic part of nationalism instead of an external force, and this "intertwining involves the coincidence of religious and national boundaries."<sup>21</sup> This intertwining of religion and nationalism also supplies myths and symbols that are "central to the discursive or iconic representation of the nation."<sup>22</sup>

## 1.3 Ethnicity

Constructivists argue that "ethnicity is not a historical given at all, but in fact a highly adaptive and malleable phenomenon".<sup>23</sup> 'Adjarians' were listed as a separate ethnic group in the USSR until 1925, after which they were officially considered ethnic Georgians. Nowadays Georgian Muslims are regarded as ethnically Georgian by the state, because they belong to the same "extended family" as majority Georgian Christians. Although at a *de jure* level Georgian Muslims are considered ethnically Georgian, there are many examples of the Georgian government systematically oppressing them through rhetoric, national symbols, failure to implement minority protection policies, and non-action

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<sup>21</sup> Rogers Brubaker, "Religion and Nationalism: Four Approaches," *Nations and Nationalism* 18, no. 1 (2011): 12

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Kordell and Wolff, *Ethnic Conflict*, p 7.



towards violations of religious freedom. Therefore, the government claims to accept Georgian Muslims as ethnically Georgian, but their actions show that in reality Georgian Muslims are treated as ‘second class’ Georgians.

The definition of ethnicity that will be used in this thesis is from ethnosymbolism. Smith (1991) describes an ethnic group as “a type of cultural collectivity, one that emphasizes the role of myths of descent and historical memories, and that is recognized by one or more cultural differences like religion, customs, language, or institutions.”<sup>24</sup> Georgian Muslims are partially included and partially excluded from the majority Georgian’s “cultural collectivity”. As will be further expanded in the third chapter of this thesis, often times majority Georgians automatically assign a different ethnicity to Georgian Muslims because they consider that if one is not Orthodox Christian then one cannot be Georgian. While Georgian Muslims speak Georgian, carry on Georgian customs, and believe themselves to be Georgian, they are often times labeled as ethnically Turkish by the Georgian Orthodox community.

#### 1.4 Identity

Ethnicity takes on a complex role in the case of Georgian Muslims. Their ethnic classification as Georgian depends largely on both collective and self-identity. Brubaker and Cooper in “Beyond Identity” distinguish three clusters of terms that can be used for ‘identity’, as they recognize that the term ‘identity’ has been overburdened. The first cluster is “identification and categorization”. Identification implies that there is an agent doing the identifying, specifically identifying oneself. ‘Self-identification’ can mean situating oneself into a wider narrative, putting oneself into a category, and locating oneself among others. Georgian Muslims self-identify as being ethnically Georgian and Muslim. Even when the Adjara region was part of the Ottoman Empire, most Georgians in Adjara

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<sup>24</sup> Smith, A.D. (1991) *National Identity*.

continued to identify as Georgian, but also began to identify as Sunni Muslim. As Brubaker points out “However one identifies oneself – and how one is identified by others – may vary greatly from context to context; self- and other- identification are fundamentally situational and contextual.”<sup>25</sup> The Georgian Christian and Georgian Muslims self-identification are both brought to the forefront in this thesis, as well as Georgians self-identification as European.

The second cluster ‘identity’ can refer to is “self-understanding and self-location”. Self-understanding is yet another important concept for this thesis, as it takes into account one’s “situated subjectivity”, in which one identifies who they are, where one fits into society, and how one should act in given situations. It is also pointed out in identity theory that self-understanding is not a fixed location. One may find themselves in a web of intersecting identities in which they must situate themselves based on the current circumstances. Identifying as both Georgian and Muslim can be considered as ‘intersecting identities’, as well as identifying as both Georgian and European.

Finally, the third cluster put forward by Brubaker and Cooper is “commonality, connectedness, groupness”. The first two clusters focus mostly on individual identity, whereas this cluster is concerned with ‘collective identity’, in which they define as “the 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”.<sup>26</sup> ‘Commonality’ refers to sharing similar traits, while ‘connectedness’ refers to “relational ties that link people.” Georgian Muslims do share commonalities with the Georgian Christian majority including language, traditions, culture, and a shared self-identified nationality. But neither ‘commonality’ nor ‘connectedness’ always result in ‘groupness’, therefore Max Weber pinpoints a third element, the “feeling of belonging together”. This togetherness can be to certain degrees and change across time. “Such a feeling may

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<sup>25</sup> Brubaker and Cooper, “Beyond Identity”, p 14.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p 19.

indeed depend in part on the degrees and forms of commonality and connectedness, but it will also depend on other factors such as particular events, their encoding in compelling narratives, prevailing discursive frameworks, and so on.”<sup>27</sup> Throughout Georgian history this “feeling of belonging together” between Georgian Muslims and Georgian Orthodox Christians has transformed and taken on many different degrees. In this case the “particular events”, the “compelling narratives”, and the “prevailing discursive frameworks” which transform the Georgian ‘groupness’ are in large part due to the rise and fall of the Soviet Union, the historical narrative of Georgians as the protectors of Christianity, and the European identity which is being created and reinforced by Georgian elite since 1991. Therefore, at times Georgian Muslims and Georgian Christians did experience this “feeling of belonging together”, especially during the Soviet times when religion was not in the public sphere and there was no dispute over ethnic identity between the two groups. Now the two religious communities do not experience this ‘groupness’, as Georgian identity is now strongly tied to religious identity, and the elite’s narrative of being pro-European is often times perceived as being pro-Christian and anti-Muslim.

### 1.5 Georgian Muslims

It is important to note that this thesis looks specifically at the Georgian Muslim minority group residing within the Republic of Georgia in the Adjara region. This thesis will refer to the group as ‘Georgian Muslims’. This term is controversial due to the fact that many Georgians do not consider Muslims as Georgian, although Muslims in Adjara do self-identify ethnically as Georgian. Other scholarship on Georgian Muslims has referred to the group in various ways including, but not limited to - Ajaran, Adjarian, and Ajar people. These terms for are not sufficient nor appropriate for describing the Muslim population in Adjara, because they can imply that “Adjarian” is a separate ethnic group.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p 20.

There are other Muslim communities residing within the Republic of Georgia, but these communities identify as ethnically Azerbaijani, Chechen, and others. As this thesis is concerned with religious identity it will focus specifically on the Georgian Muslim community in Adjara, in order to control for ethnic difference.

Georgians strong national identity being tied to Orthodox Christianity actively excludes minorities, specifically Muslim minorities. Aydingün argues that “religion based national identity in a multi-religious society like Georgia is one of the main factors endangering national integrity that is already under threat by other factors.” She asserts that, “religion-based national identity is one of the main sources of conflict, violence, discrimination, and minority rights violations.”<sup>28</sup> Her work partially focuses on Muslim communities in Georgia and how they are perceived as a threat to the Georgian national identity. The promotion of Orthodox Christianity in Georgia is “gradually becoming more oppressive, especially for Sunni Avars, who are ethnically Georgian.” Conversion to Christianity in Adjara has increased since the fall of the Soviet Union. Georgian Muslims in Adjara are often facing pressure from the Orthodox community. This can be seen through several cases, including the opening of an Orthodox religious university in the Shuakhevi region of Adjara and the 2014 Kobuleti religious freedom violation which will be outlined in Chapter 3.

It is also important to consider how Georgia identifies itself as being a European nation and how it perceives Europe. Kornely Kakachia argues that identity and ideology are important factors to explaining Georgia’s pro-European orientation.<sup>29</sup> If one applied the rationalist or neorealist approach

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<sup>28</sup> Aydingun, Aysegul, “The Ethnification and Nationalization of Religion in the Post-Soviet Georgian Nation-State Building Process: A Source of Discrimination and Minority Rights Violations?,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 17, no. 7 (December 12, 2013): 810–28.

<sup>29</sup> Kornely Kakachia, “Identity Politics: Exploring Georgian Foreign Policy Behavior,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 6, no. 2 (July 2016): 171–80.

to Georgia's foreign policy behavior one would predict that Georgia's pro-Western orientation would have faded after the West's failure to intervene in the 2008 war. Georgia could have just as easily bandwagoned with Russia instead of continuing to follow its Western aspirations. Most transitioning nations have a top-down approach to identity formation<sup>30</sup>, and considering the lack of knowledge about European institutions among the Georgian population, this top-down approach is certainly visible in Georgia.<sup>31</sup> The elite rhetoric has shown since the 1990's that Georgia has always kept a pro-Western orientation. Georgia's Western or European self-identity is the reason for their continued European orientation.

As Georgia's foreign policy behavior and Western-orientation is based on their self-identity of being a European nation, it is important to look at exactly how Georgia identifies with Europe. In Kakachia and Minesashvili's work they identify that Georgia's desire for freedom and democratic values ties them to the pro-European orientation. On the other hand, many scholars also attribute this 'European identity' in Georgia directly to their Christian heritage.

This thesis will now turn to examining the religious and ethnic makeup of the Republic of Georgia, and how Georgian elites have framed "Georgianness" since the fall of the Soviet Union.

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<sup>30</sup> Lane, "Identity formation and political elites on post-socialist states," *Elites and identities in post-Soviet space* (Routledge, 2011) 1-11

<sup>31</sup> Muller, "Public opinion toward the European Union in Georgia," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 27(1), (2011) 64-92.

## Chapter 2: Religion, Ethnicity, and the Contestation of Georgian Identity

Georgia, a country of nearly 5 million people, is made up of many different ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups. Approximately 84% of the population is made up of ethnic Georgians, while Azeris consist of 6.5% of the population, Armenians 5.7%, and Russians 1.5%. Religious pluralism in Georgia is also present. Orthodox Christians form 84% of the population, Islam comes in second at approximately 10%, and Armenian-Gregorian around 4% of the population.<sup>32</sup> Historically Georgia has been a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, as it was a central location on the Silk Road and a prime trading post between Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. This being said, Georgia has quite significant cultural influences from all these different regions.

Despite the diversity that can be observed in Georgia, Georgian elites portray the myth of Georgia as a homogenous nation, while the country is in fact a pluralist nation. The Georgian elites chose to frame “Georgia for the Georgians”, in which they framed “Georgianness” as being Georgian ethnically, Georgian Orthodox, and Georgian-speaking, while anyone who does not have these three qualities are excluded from this “Georgianness”. Georgians tend to consider themselves to be “tolerant” people, as they will say “Look, we have a mosque, a synagogue, and a church all in the same block of Tbilisi. Of course we are a tolerant nation.”<sup>33</sup> However, by examining rhetoric and actions of the Georgian elites, it is easy to identify the framing of Georgians as a homogenous group in which minorities are and should be actively excluded or oppressed. This leads me to first examine the majority Georgian Orthodox identity and how it has been framed by the Georgian elites. I will also

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<sup>32</sup> “The World Factbook - Georgia” (Central Intelligence Agency, 2015), <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/gg.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Rachel Bending, “Minority Integration in Post-Soviet States: The Case of Post-Soviet Georgia” (Central European University, 2012).

examine Georgian Muslim identity and how it has been a clear contestation to the what the Georgian elites have framed as “Georgian.” Frame-makers will be identified in this chapter and how they have framed the dominant Georgian identity since the fall of the Soviet Union will be demonstrated.

### 2.1 Georgian Orthodox Identity

One cannot examine modern Georgian identity without looking to Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the first elected president of post-Soviet Georgia. Gamsakhurdia acts as a ‘frame-maker’ concerning identity formation in modern Georgia. He promoted ethnic nationalism during and after the fall of the Soviet Union. The nationalist message had a very strong religious aspect coming from the Georgian Orthodox church. Through this, Gamsakhurdia established a strong sense of national identity, which included the Georgian Orthodox church as a main pillar in Georgian identity. Firstly, the Georgian Orthodox Church distinguished Christianity in Georgia from Russian Orthodoxy and the Soviet Atheist ideology. It also reinforced the historical narrative that Georgia has been a protector of Christianity from centuries of Islamic invaders. This narrative pushed Muslims into the ‘Other’ category, including Georgian Muslims. This therefore excluded the Georgian Muslims from the Georgian majorities feeling of “groupness”. Gamsakhurdia established the idea that those who oppose Georgian ethnic and religious identity are threatening to Georgian national identity.<sup>34</sup> This is something that can still be observed in Georgian society today. Although a revolt against Gamsakhurdia’s regime occurred in 1992, the other regimes that followed Gamsakhurdia’s – Eduard Shevardnadze (1992-2003) and Mikheil Saakashvili (2004-2013) – continued to frame Georgian

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<sup>34</sup> Tamta Khalvashi and Nutsa Batiashvili, “Can Muslim Be a Georgian?” Historic Overview of Discourse on Georgian ‘Essence” (University of Georgia, 2009).

Orthodoxy as an important aspect of Georgian society and Georgian identity. Shevardnadze and Saakashvili are both considered ‘frame-makers’ of modern Georgian national identity as well.

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

## 2.2 Georgian Muslim Identity

From the three characteristics of what defines a ‘Georgian’, one can obviously see where Georgian Muslim identity conflicts with Georgian majority identity and is therefore seen as threatening to the national identity. The Georgian Muslim identity contests the majority Georgian Orthodox identity, by creating a sense of “Georgianness” in which Orthodox Christianity is not a main pillar of collective identification.

Georgian Muslims self-identify as ethnic Georgian. Not only are they ethnically Georgian, but they also speak Georgian and carry on the same culture and traditions, including Georgian dance and the traditional Georgian feasts ‘supra’, in which pork and wine are often times consumed. Georgian Muslims feel patriotism towards the Georgian state as can be seen through their pro-Georgian sentiment throughout history. At the same time, they also feel alienated and shamed by the majority Georgian population because of their religious identity.

Orthodox Georgians often 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”. Often time, Orthodox Georgians pressure Georgian Muslims to convert back to the religion of their ancestors and become “full Georgians”



once again.<sup>35</sup> 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:

“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.”

The first two sections of this chapter have illustrated what constitutes the Georgian Orthodox and the Georgian Muslim identities, as well as pointed out the elite frame-makers. Now I will turn to more specific acts by the Georgian frame-makers in their interaction with the region of Adjara since the fall of the Soviet Union.

### 2.3 Post-Soviet Georgia: Adjara's Opposition of Georgian Orthodox Identity

Georgia's history after the collapse of the Soviet Union highlights the intolerance and the divergence between Georgian Orthodox and Georgian Muslim identities. In the early 1990s, Gamsakhurdia started speaking publicly about abolishing Adjara's autonomous standing within the newly independent Georgia as was done in South Ossetia. But Georgian Muslims, especially those in the mountainous areas of the Keda, Shuakhevi, and Khulo districts<sup>36</sup> (*See Appendix 2*) protested fiercely against the abolishment.<sup>37</sup> For this reason, plus Gamsakhurdia's very forceful pro-Orthodox rhetoric,

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<sup>35</sup> Inga Popovaite, “Religious and National Aspects of Georgian Muslim Women's Identity in the Autonomous Region of Adjara” (Central European University, 2014).

<sup>36</sup> The upper regions of Adjara are the most predominantly Muslim. The further East from the coastline of Adjara, the more mountainous and remote the terrain becomes. Going east, the districts in Adjara get progressively more Muslim and less Christian. Therefore, Keda has a higher population of Muslims than Batumi, Shuakhevi has a higher Muslim population than Keda, and Khulo has the highest population of Georgian Muslims in Adjara.

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Wheatley, *Georgia From National Awakening to Rose Revolution* (Burlington, VT USA: Ashgate Publishing, 2005).

Georgians in Adjara did not vote for Gamsakhurdia's Free Georgian bloc party, instead they voted heavily in favor of the Communist Party.<sup>38</sup>

With ethnic conflicts stirring in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Gamsakhurdia placed Adjara under the care of Aslan Abashidze in 1991. Abashidze is from a 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. After Gamsakhurdia's regime was overthrown in 1992, Abashidze declared a state of emergency and closed the borders of Adjara. New President Eduard Shevardnadze more or less accepted Abashidze's rule in Adjara, and allowed him to stay in power throughout his presidency. It is assumed that Shevardnadze was willing to allow Abashidze to keep power in Adjara as long as the region remained stable. During Abashidze's regime in Adjara, he developed good relations with Turkey and Russia. He established his own small army in Adjara in order to keep peace in the region, and keep the other paramilitary groups that were reigning Georgia at that time, out of Adjarian territory.<sup>39</sup> He strengthened Adjara's autonomy while the Georgian central government was involved in armed conflicts in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>40</sup> Even though their autonomy was strong, secessionism never became a concern in Adjara. Georgian Muslims in Adjara continued to have a strong sense of Georgian national identity throughout the uncertain 1990s.<sup>41</sup>

Throughout the Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze administrations, the Georgian government turned a blind eye to Adjara and the full autonomy 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

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 71

<sup>40</sup> Elkhan Nuriyev, *The South Caucasus at the Crossroads* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2007)

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

administration was to “crack down on separatism within Georgia”.<sup>42</sup> 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. Bridges connecting Adjara and the rest of Georgia were blown up 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 then fully reunited with the Georgian central government on May 7, 2004. Also at this time, Saaskhashvili further opened up the region to Turkish investors. Religious tensions and violations of freedom of religion started to become more prominent in the region after 2004.<sup>43</sup> Many saw the increase in Turkish investment as an invasion of Islamic identity. In turn, hostility towards Georgian Muslims has increased since 2004, because of Orthodox Georgians categorizing them as ‘Turkish sympathizers’ and refusing their self-identification as Georgian nationals.<sup>44</sup>

This chapter has explored the Georgian national identity and how Georgian Muslim identity has contested the elite identity frames that have been created since the fall of the Soviet Union. Now I will turn to examining another aspect of Georgian identity; the Georgian self-identification as European.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 211

<sup>43</sup> Gahrton, Per. 2010. *Georgia: Pawn in the New Great Game*. Pluto Press.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

### Chapter 3: The Framing of Georgian European Identity

Georgia is nestled among great regional powers, with Russia to the North, and Turkey and Iran to the South. Yet they choose to look West, across the Black Sea, in order to address their regional identity. Georgia's 'Europeanness' is no longer a question in the eyes of the elite. Europe is now a crucial part of their Georgian identity frames and foreign policy orientation. But if they do not share a land border with Europe, and it would be much easier to align with one of the closer regional powers, why do they choose the 'European identity' over any other?

Firstly, as I established in the first chapter, Georgia's Orthodox Christian identity is framed as inseparable from their perceived ethnic identity. Russia shares a predominantly Orthodox Christian identity, so why not align with Orthodox Russia? In the eyes of Georgians, this is problematic for a number of reasons. As Georgia is a small, recently independent nation, their greatest interest is maintaining a secure and independent state. Russia is seen as the successor of the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire, both of which historically occupied Georgia. Furthermore, Russia is recognized by the international community as occupying a portion of Georgia's territory (Abkhazia) and also engaged in a war with Georgia in 2008 over South Ossetia. Therefore, Russia is viewed as an aggressor both historically and currently, and therefore threatening to Georgia's sovereignty. For that reason, Georgia cannot identify with Russia, even though they have very similar religious affiliations.

Identifying with Turkey or Iran as a regional identity is also a possibility considering Georgia's geographic location and historical ties to these nations. But the 'Islamic Middle East' is also viewed as an 'other' in the Georgian perception. Firstly, Georgia was also occupied by Islamic empires many times throughout history which has created a historical narrative of Georgians being "protectors of Christianity", so to align with a Muslim country would be detrimental to their perceived historical narrative which feeds directly into the self-identity. Secondly, with the War on Terror and the threat of ISIS to Georgia, Georgians have a strong Islamophobia. That being the case, they do not only

‘other’ Muslims in a historical sense but also in a contemporary sense. Therefore, they refuse to identify regionally with Turkey or Iran.

With Russia, Turkey, and Iran excluded from possible regional affiliations, this leaves Europe. The rest of this chapter will map out the framing of Georgia’s European identity beginning from the Russian Empire up until present day with their current Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Then the modern perception of Georgia’s Christian European identity will be explained. First, a brief overview of Georgia’s relationship with the European Union will be given, then the framing of Georgia as a European nation will be explained. Finally, the chapter will conclude by examining Georgia’s perception of Christian Europe.

### 3.1 Georgia and Europe: Historical Overview

Georgia’s forced incorporation into the Russian empire at the beginning of the nineteenth century is credited for providing Georgia with its first European ideals of nationalism, socialism, and liberalism.<sup>45</sup> During their short independence from 1918-1921 Georgia established a social democratic government which was praised by European countries at the time, and strengthened Georgia’s European self-perception. Throughout the Soviet times, European influence was generally weak and at times nonexistent in the Caucasus. However, during and after the fall of the Soviet Union, Georgia’s European dream was reignited.

The first years of independence after the Soviet Union were characterized by an extreme national movement led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia. His short regime established a renewed Georgian identity, but did not do well with establishing international recognition. As Tarkhan-Mouravi describes, “Georgia’s independence in its first year was characterized by civil turmoil and international isolation, but after the return of Eduard Shevardnadze in March 1992, European countries were

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 50

among the first to recognize Georgia's new statehood."<sup>46</sup> Therefore, Gamsakhurdia can be seen as a national identity frame-maker, but did not contribute to framing Georgia's European identity.

Also in 1992, Georgia joined both the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Partnership for Peace program. Until the mid-1990s Georgia's relationship with Europe was basically through humanitarian assistance to help the country reestablish itself after the fall of communism and the civil war. After the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement was signed in July 1999 Georgian-European relations started covering issues regarding trade, human rights, and security.<sup>47</sup> This agreement did not prove to be very successful seeing that in September of 2003 a report was issued by the European Commission expressing its disappointment in the Georgian government's failure to show any improvements, even after a decade of EU assistance. The Commission then stated that financial assistance would continue to be provided only if the Georgian government implemented credible reform measures.<sup>48</sup>

Shortly after this Commission statement was released the Rose Revolution broke out in which Georgians took to the streets to force the resignation of President Eduard Shevardnadze. Following the Rose Revolution Mikheil Saakashvili took charge of the newly established Georgian government. President Saakashvili started a new chapter in Georgia's European aspirations. At this time European integration became a primary focus of the Georgian government.

"...pro-European rhetoric and expressed hopes of Euro-Atlantic integration became a universal theme of all governments in Georgia, which replaced one another in a sequence of coups and upheavals. However, in the aftermath of the Rose Revolution such rhetoric became particularly strong and EU flags, mimicking those of the Council of Europe, proudly flew in front of every official building in Georgia."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 51

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 51

<sup>48</sup> Ibid

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 52

After the Rose Revolution, the EU started to show a more positive attitude towards Georgia as President Saakashvili's regime initiated a new anti-corruption project which proved to be successful throughout his time in power. Saakashvili, as well as being a Georgian identity framer, was also the most important European identity framer in modern day Georgia.

In 2012 the Georgian Dream party, led by Bidzina Ivanishvili, won the parliamentary elections over Saakashvili's United National Movement party. The next year in the presidential race the Georgian Dream party took another victory with their candidate, Giorgi Margvelishvili. As this party took office, some expected that there would be a change in Georgia's European orientation, as the Georgian Dream party takes a less harsh stance in their policies towards Russia. Yet in President Margvelishvili's victory speech he reiterated Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations, as well as the pursuit of normalization efforts with Russia. Consequently, the most recent change in political orientation in Georgia did not change Georgia's European orientation.

Currently the EU manages its relations with Georgia through the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP). In June of 2012 the EU-Georgia Visa Liberalization Dialogue began, and in February of 2013 the Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP) was presented to the Georgian authorities.<sup>50</sup> In 2014 Georgia signed the EU Association Agreement which deepened its ties with the EU both economically and politically. In December of 2015 the EU announced that Georgia has met all the requirements in the VLAP. The fourth progress report for visa liberalization showed that Georgia had met all the benchmarks required in order to achieve visa free travel to the

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<sup>50</sup> "Visa Liberalisation with Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia" (European Commission, 2016), [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/international-affairs/eastern-partnership/visa-liberalisation-moldova-ukraine-and-georgia/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/international-affairs/eastern-partnership/visa-liberalisation-moldova-ukraine-and-georgia/index_en.htm).

Schengen zone. It is expected that this step will keep up momentum in Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration process.

This section has given a short historical overview of Georgia's relations to Europe from the Russian Empire to the most recent engagements with the European Union. Now I will delve into how Georgia has framed its European identity before moving onto the European Christian perception.

### 3.2 Framing of European Identity

Georgia's European identity has been a focus of debate since the nineteenth century.<sup>51</sup> Ó Beacháin and Coene (2014) illustrate how Georgian political elites are currently framing Georgia's connection to Europe:

“Fundamental to Georgia's foreign policy is the tenet that Georgia is an old, if not the oldest, European country, one which has been taken down civilizational cul-de-sacs, be they in the guise of Persian, Ottoman, Russian, or Soviet empires, but which in recent years had sought to retake its rightful place in Europe.”

Ó Beacháin and Coene examine the political elites' rhetoric of Georgia's self-perceived European identity, and then provide a constructivist approach to the formation and evolution of the concepts of “Europe” and “Europeanness” in the Georgian government's official discourse.<sup>52</sup> The Georgian elites claim that Georgia has “always been European and that European values are at the core of Georgian society.”<sup>53</sup> This has been the discourse in Georgia since the fall of the Soviet Union and was also present during the 1918-1921 Democratic Republic of Georgia. But Georgia's true claims to Europe are often times questioned.

“There is little historiographical evidence or support for the identity sentiments or emotional affiliations of the Georgian nation. The Georgians had close ties with, and were in some ways a part of, the Greco-Roman and Byzantine worlds, but there are no indications to what extent they identified themselves with these civilizations and cultures. Still, what seems to be indisputable, however, is the fact that the Christian faith played a central role in the way

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<sup>51</sup> Gia Tarkhan-Mouravi, “Georgia's European Aspirations and the Eastern Partnership,” in *The Making of Modern Georgia*, ed. Stephan Jones (New York, NY USA: Routledge, 2014), 49–73

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 924

<sup>53</sup> Ibid



Georgian elite viewed itself and that Christian Europe was important for Georgia's foreign policy orientation."<sup>54</sup>

In the late nineteenth century, the Georgian identity was viewed as being closer to the East. Iliia Chavchavadze, the famous Georgian writer and leader of the national movement, positioned Georgia as part of Western Asia.<sup>55</sup> He even expressed anxiety about European culture breaking down the authentic Georgian lifestyle. The *tsisperkantselni*, a group of Georgian academics who were educated in Western Europe, are credited for the major shift in the Georgian European self-perception between 1915 and 1931. They recognized Georgia as being both Eastern and Western, however, they preferred the Western orientation as they viewed the Asian traditions as being outdated and undesirable for the Georgian state.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, they promoted Georgia's "return" to the European space. The *tsisperkantselni* can be credited as being the first 'frame-makers' for Georgia's European self-identity.

The formation of the Georgian European identity started as a movement away from the old Asian traditions, in which intellectuals felt were holding Georgia back from its national potential. Nowadays, Georgia's 'Europeanness' is taken as an unquestionable fact.

"Since the Europeanness of Georgia and the Georgians is portrayed and perceived as an absolute truth, there is not much discussion in society challenging this axiom as the elite have come up with multiple supporting arguments, many of them finding their origins with the *tsisperkantselni*. Georgian society does not welcome divergent views and perceives questioning these arguments as a heresy committed by pro-Russian traitors who do not wish to see a prosperous future for Georgia."<sup>57</sup>

The formation of Georgia's European identity has a complex and controversial history, although two themes emerge from Georgia's self-perceived 'Europeanness': Christianity and 'European values'. The

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 925

<sup>55</sup> Adrian Brisku, "Albanian and Georgia Discourses on Europe: From Berlin 1878 to Tbilisi 2008" (European University Institute, 2009).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

<sup>57</sup> Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Frederik Coene, "Go West: Georgia's European Identity and Its Role in Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy Objectives," *Nationalities Papers* 42, no. 6 (2014): 926

next two sections of this chapter will now break down these two components of Georgia's European identity frame.

### 3.3 The Georgian Perception of Christian Europe

As outlined in Chapter 1, Christianity is one of the main pillars of Georgian national identity, but how does Christianity feed into their perceived European identity? For many Georgians, being Christian is the main and most important marker of being European. Many Europeans may also perceive Christianity as a marker for 'Europeanness'.<sup>58</sup> Although as most European countries are moving away from Christian values and towards modern, secular states, one can assume that the Christian marker for "Europeanness" is fading away, at least in most countries on the European continent. At the same time, the current right wing social movements that are happening in Poland and Hungary, which have evident Christian components, can also be testimony that not all European countries embrace the modern, secular model and still embrace Christianity as being an obligatory trait for European nations.

Nonetheless, Georgia's European self-identification is undoubtedly tied to their Christian heritage. Since the nineteenth century Georgian historiography created an image of the Muslim 'other' in order to define true Orthodox Georgians. In this particular case, a true Georgian is framed as Christian, European, and 'warrior-martyr'.<sup>59</sup> This Christian warrior or martyr comes from the historical narrative of Georgia defending Western Christianity through the invasions of Islamic Mongols, Persians, and Turks. Recently, since the fall of the Soviet Union, newly established museums in

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 927

<sup>59</sup> Stephan Jones, "The Role of Cultural Paradigms in Georgian Foreign Policy," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 19, no. 3 (2003): 91.

Georgia portray the Georgian battles against Muslim enemies, which provide symbolic frames of Georgia's Christian-European identity, and also further 'other' Islamic identity in Georgia.<sup>60</sup>

### 3.4 European Values and Minority Rights

Outside of the Christian aspect of Georgia's European identity, they also claim to have 'European values'. This sub-section will briefly overview how European values are framed by Georgian elites and how they are stated in the EU's European Neighborhood Policy, which Georgia's EU relationship is managed by. The European values laid out by the EU include minority rights. As was mentioned in the introduction, one may assume that Georgia's minority rights have improved throughout their Europeanization process, but this is not the case regarding religious minorities. Evidence will be shown that the Georgia's 'European values' are easily disputable. Also, considering Georgia is far from being a candidate country, the EU's ability to pressure changes in Georgia's policy implementation of minority rights is very weak.

The few scholars who have explored Georgia's 'European values' find there to be a relatively large disconnect between the stated values and the actual values the country demonstrates.<sup>61</sup> Stephan Jones in his article, "The Cultural Paradigms in Georgian Foreign Policy", investigates the values laid out in documents<sup>62</sup> passed by the Georgian parliament. In these documents he finds that the Georgian state outlines the Western model of liberal democracy, which includes human rights, rule of law, and protection of ethnic minorities. However, these documents also give a special place to the Georgian Orthodox church (as does the 1995 Georgian Constitution). The documents acknowledge the need for separation of church and state, but make it a point that there does *not* need to be a separation of

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>61</sup> Stephan Jones, "The Role of Cultural Paradigms in Georgian Foreign Policy," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 19, no. 3 (2003): 91.

<sup>62</sup> These documents include 'Basic Principles of the Sustainability of Social Life, the Strengthening of State Sovereignty and Security, and the Restoration of the Territorial Integrity of Georgia' (1997), 'Georgian Military Doctrine' (1997), and 'Georgian National Security Concept'.

the church from Georgian society, and the need to “stimulate Orthodox traditions” in Georgia is also mentioned.

Outside of these official documents, the European or Western values appear to be contrary to how the Georgian society operates on a day to day basis. The immensely patriarchal society, the authoritarian style of institutions, and the clan-based network that most of the country still operates under is quite opposite to the Western Values Georgian elites claim to have.

It can be shown that Georgian’s sense of European values can be easily contested. Official documents, and observation of societal functioning simply dismiss Georgia’s hold to values they deem as European. As Georgia is mostly operating with the European Union under the European Neighborhood Policy I will now discuss the values that are outlined in that political framework.

As Bosse claims, “few attempts have been made to critically reflect on the “values dimensions” of the ENP” which Georgia is currently a part of.<sup>63</sup> The standard definition of ‘European values’ has not been established so he looks at the values set out in the Copenhagen Criteria developed by the EU in 1993. These were established as criteria for candidate EU countries to fulfill before joining the union. They include: 1) stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities 2) a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competition and market forces 3) administrative and institutional capacity to effectively implement the *acquis* and ability to take on the obligations of membership.<sup>64</sup> Georgia is still far from being considered a candidate country to the European Union, but Visa Liberalization that was

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<sup>63</sup> Giselle Bosse, “Values in the EU’s Neighborhood Policy: Political Rhetoric or Reflection of a Coherent Policy?,” *European Political Economy Review* 7 (2007): 38–62.

<sup>64</sup> “EU Enlargement - Accession Criteria” (European Union, 2012).  
[http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/accession-criteria\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/accession-criteria_en.htm)

accepted in December of 2015 is a step closer to candidate status. Even though the EU deemed all benchmarks of the VLAP complete, including the benchmarks on minority protection, it can be shown that these changes have not been implemented.

#### 3.4.4 Minority Protection

Guido Schwellnus explores the “Adoption of Nondiscrimination and Minority Protection Rules in Romania, Hungary, and Poland”, in which he finds there to be a discrepancy between the internal and external application of minority norm protection by the EU. Firstly, the meaning of ‘minority protection’ laid out in the Copenhagen Criteria has no set guideline for what exactly it entails. Furthermore, the EU has applied different minority criteria for different countries depending on the extent to which the issues are relevant to the security of the EU.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, conditionality regarding minority protection, at least at this point in Georgia’s Europeanization process, will not result in any adoption of norms.

The next chapter will show recent violations toward the Georgian Muslim minority community. This non-enforcement of policy change also shows the inability of the EU to produce strong minority protection measures in the ENP, including Georgia. The next chapter will also provide empirical findings to support the claims outlined in the first two chapters: 1) that elites are framing Georgian national identity as being inseparable from Orthodox Christianity and 2) that Georgia’s perception of ‘Europeanness’ and ‘European values’ are inherently based on Christianity.

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<sup>65</sup> Guido Schwellnus, “The Adoption of Nondiscrimination and Minority Protection Rules in Romania, Hungary, and Poland,” in *The Europeanization of Central and Eastern Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 51–70.

## Chapter 4: Oppression of Georgian Muslims at a State and Societal Level

As the first two chapters have established, Georgian identity and the self-perceived ‘Europeanness’ of Georgians are both closely linked to Christianity. The Christian component of these identities, plus the historical narratives accompanying them, are actively framing Muslims as the ‘other’ in Georgian society. Since 2012 the number of religious freedom violations against Muslims has increased in Georgia. Although in the Georgian constitution there is protection of religious freedom in Article 14 and 19, it can be seen through several cases that the Georgian government firstly contributes to the oppression of the Muslim community by forming institutions that are *de jure* supposed to protect the religious minority, but are *de facto* used as a tool to discourage the exercise of the freedom of religion. Secondly, the Georgian government continues to frame violations of religious freedom against Muslims as lesser crimes, such as petty hooliganism. This chapter will explain the cases that were uncovered and discussed in interviews done in the Republic of Georgia with a legal NGO which works to protect marginalized groups in Georgia.

### 4.1 Framing of Georgian Muslims as the ‘Other’

Brubaker and Cooper’s conceptualization of identity examines the modern state and how it can act as a major agent in identification and categorization. The state can give ‘identity’ through official means, such as passports, citizenship, etc., but the state also has the power to create identities through “material and symbolic resources to impose the categories.”<sup>66</sup> The modern Georgian state is currently framing the Orthodox Georgian majority identity and the ‘othering’ the Muslim minority. Before and after the fall of the Soviet Union, Christian symbolism of Georgia has been apparent through a number of channels. Here I will cover the most significant Muslim ‘othering’ that occurred

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p 16.

after the fall of the Soviet Union until Saakashvili's regime, then I will turn to more present day state level oppression.

The first sign of this Christian identity conflict with Georgian Muslims in Adjara was shortly before the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 when Gamsakhurdia travelled to Adjara to give a speech intended to rally support for Georgian independence. He exclaimed in his speech to a large crowd, "Adjarians! You are Georgians too!" This claim was quite controversial among the Georgian population in Adjara. Some viewed it as a reinforcement of their Georgian identity. Others viewed it as a statement with a hidden meaning. As in, 'of course we are Georgian, was it ever a question?' This statement plus the mass baptism that was organized in Batumi by Gamsakhurdia, made it apparent to many Georgian Muslims that their status within the newly independent Georgian nation was at stake. Many were convinced that the Georgian nation is undoubtedly connected to the Orthodox church and converted to Orthodox Christianity. Others, especially in the more remote mountainous regions of Adjara, especially in the Keda, Shuakhevi and Khulo districts, maintained their Muslim identities and began to reopen mosques and establish religious education institutions.

In 1991 an Orthodox church was constructed in the Khulo region and Gamsakhurdia gave the residential boarding school over to the control of the Georgian Orthodox Church.<sup>67</sup> The school is now open to both Muslim and Christian students but the curriculum is centered around the teaching of Christian beliefs and Christian values. The school also serves as a kindergarten; the children, regardless of religion, are all blessed by the Orthodox priests.<sup>68</sup> Also in 1997, under Shevardnadze's administration a mandatory course on Culture and Religion was added to the public school curriculum. The lesson plans teach solely about Christianity's place in Georgia and do not cover any other religion.

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<sup>67</sup> Thomas Liles, "Islam and Religious Transformation in Adjara," *European Centre for Minority Protection* 57 (2012).

<sup>68</sup> Ibid

This course brought disapproval among the Adjarian population, but no large movements to change the curriculum by the Adjarian population appeared.<sup>69</sup> This could have been firstly, as Thomas Liles points out in his report on Adjara, because the Georgian public school system is quite poor and many students do not study or internalize the curriculum. Secondly, this also could have been owed to the fact that Adjara was under Abashidze's regime at this point, therefore curriculum set out by the Georgian central government was not as actively enforced.

During Abashidze's rule in Adjara, tension between the Muslim and Christian populations was lower than it has been since 2004. As stated earlier, Abashidze was from a historically prominent Muslim family, although he himself never claimed to follow any religion. Furthermore, his grandchildren were baptized Orthodox Christian. That being the case, his position was seen by some as being a sort of liaison between the two religious groups. Although in his later years he did become more explicit about his support of Orthodox Christianity over Islam. He contributed to the building of churches in the Khulo region but did not provide any finances for the building or remodeling of mosques.<sup>70</sup>

After 2004, although Saakashvili attempted to create a more inclusive Georgian state, Christian symbolism became even more apparent. The most obvious being the change of the Georgian flag from the tricolored flag of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921 and 1990-2004) to a flag fashioning five St. George's crosses (*See Appendix 3*). After Saakashvili's government took Adjara back under the control of the Georgian Central government, a new flag was fashioned for the Autonomous Adjara as well (*See Appendix 4*). This flag includes a canton of the Georgian flag with the crosses and

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid

<sup>70</sup> Mathijs Pelkmans, *Defending the Border: Identity, Religion, and Modernity in the Republic of Georgia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006). 119



the seven blue and white stripes to represent the Black Sea and ‘purity’. The new Adjarian flag obviously reinforces Adjara as being part of a Christian Georgia. The complete lack of representation of the Muslim population of Adjara and the confusion over the ‘purity’ that the white stripes are supposed to represent, are a symbolic representation of the framing of Christian identity in Georgia, and the Muslim ‘othering’. Now this chapter will move on to discuss more recent cases of oppression of the Georgian Muslim community from the Georgian government.

## 4.2 State Oppression

A semi-structured interview at The Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC) in Tbilisi uncovered many cases of intolerance of the Muslim community by the Georgian government and Georgian Orthodox citizens. EMC monitors and provides legal support to marginalized groups within Georgia. The organization was established in 2012 by former members of the Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA).

### 4.2.1 Religion as an Ethnic Marker

The first quote coming from Eto G. at EMC Tbilisi illustrates the growing intolerance towards Georgian Muslims, as Orthodox Georgians deny Georgian Muslims their self-identity as being ethnically Georgian, and assign them a new ethnic identity based solely on religion.

“After 2012 there were several cases against Muslim minorities in Georgia. Orthodox Georgians quite frequently consider them [Georgian Muslims] as ethnically Turkish. This is some kind of Turkophobia and Islamophobia. If the person is a Muslim, they consider that they want to join with Turkey and they are not ethnically Georgian, because natural Georgians should be only Orthodox. Because of that we have major conflicts in the Adjara region.”

In the Adjara region, specifically in the mountainous area, EMC regularly conducts mobile clinics in which they travel to the region and communicate with Muslim religious leaders and other members

of the community. These clinics are to inform citizens of their rights as religious minorities and also uncover systematic discrimination and social problems that are faced by the Georgian Muslim population.

Muslim religious leaders in the Adjara region often travel to and from Turkey to collect religious educational texts to bring back to Georgia. Many Georgians have been stopped and detained at the border for several hours because they were carrying religious texts. During this time the border guards would interrogate them and call the central authorities in Tbilisi to get confirmation before allowing them reentry into Georgia. The people who were detained at the borders were all Georgian citizens carrying Georgian ID. EMC is now investigating these events to reveal whether these stops of Georgian Muslims at the border crossing are part of a written, normative framework which the border guards are operating under, or if they are secret, oral orders given by the central government, or if they are simply cases of suspicious and intolerant border guards.

#### 4.2.2 State-funded Proselytization

In 2009 the Tbel Abuseridze State University was opened in Khichauri, Shuakhevi region of Adjara. This region within Adjara is estimated to be up to 90% Muslim and it is assumed that the opening of the Orthodox school is to proselytize the Georgian Muslim youth. Public education in Adjara, as the rest of Georgia, is very poor quality. Yet, the central government allocates 25 million lari a year to the Georgian Orthodox Church, in which a majority of this budget goes to religious education.<sup>71</sup> The private schools opened by the Orthodox church are known to have a significantly better quality of education. The university offers free tuition and meals to students from the Adjara region. This differs from the other public universities in Georgia which charge tuition to all students

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<sup>71</sup> Interview at EMC Tbilisi, March 16, 2016.

regardless of home region. The university is officially neutral in terms of religious affiliation as is it a public university, but the faculty is mostly made up of orthodox priests from other regions in Georgia. Interviews conducted by the European Centre of Minority Issues in 2011 also exposed that history instruction at the university is Orthodox oriented:

“One priest and history instructor state that the goals of the university’s history program is to “teach the correct facts” about religion in Adjara, which means treating Orthodoxy as an essential primordial aspect of Adjara’s history, portraying Islam as a historical aberration precipitated by the Ottoman conquest, and emphasizing the need for the region to return to Georgia, so to speak, through conversion to Christianity.”<sup>72</sup>

The Orthodox school was also built beside a Muslim religious establishment. Here, a very large and elaborate Orthodox cross is placed right next to a small and modest Muslim religious site. The staff at EMC see this construction as an attempt to send a message to the Georgian Muslim community that Georgian Orthodoxy, with its high quality of education and wealth, is a better option than Islam. The opening of this state-funded Orthodox school in a majority Muslim area highlights the Georgian governments desire to convert Georgian Muslims to Orthodox Christianity.

#### 4.2.3 State Agency for Religious Affairs: For Minority Protection or Oppression?

In 2014 the Prime Minister of Georgia decided to create a State Agency for Religious Affairs. According to a Georgian news source, the agency is meant to budget funds to “compensate the loss of different religious groups”.<sup>73</sup> The State Agency currently has a contract with the official Department of Muslims. This Department of Muslims, created in 2011, is responsible for protecting the rights of the Muslim religious minority in Adjara as well as other Muslim religious minority groups in Georgia. However, it can be shown through several cases that this organization is representing the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 13

<sup>73</sup> “Georgia Creates State Agency on Religious Affairs,” *Agenda.ge*, February 7, 2014, <http://agenda.ge/news/8170/eng>.

unofficial state interests. For example, when the Muslim community in Batumi was raising the question of building another mosque, the Department of Muslims decided to reframe the request. They proposed that instead of building another mosque, a madrasa would be open for Islamic education.<sup>74</sup>

EMC Tbilisi considers the official Department of Muslims to be controlled by the Georgian state. The founders of the Muslim organizations were former members of the Georgian Parliament and another was a former regional governor. Most Muslims in Georgia, especially in the Khulo region of Adjara, do not recognize the legitimacy of this organization. EMC reported the Department of Muslims is funded by the state, and this year they received approximately 3-4 million lari. The funding is supposed to compensate for the damage the Muslim community suffered during the Soviet times. The first year they received funding, approximately 60% of the funding was appropriated to religious leaders' salaries. Therefore, EMC speculates that these religious leaders are actually being controlled by the state through the money they receive as a 'salary' from the Department of Muslims.

Because of the obvious corrupt nature, Georgian Muslims are not using the Department of Muslims to promote their interests. They are now forming their own NGOs and unions to promote and protect their rights. One being the Network of Georgian Muslims which was founded by a well-respected Muslim leader in the Adjara region, Tariel Nakaidze. This organization receives no state funding, and after the state-funded Department of Muslims announced that there was no need for a new mosque in Batumi, the Network of Georgian Muslims collected 12,000 signatures of citizens who supported the construction of a new mosque. This shows that Georgian Muslims are beginning to realize that their rights are not being protected by the state. Georgian Muslims have begun to mobilize and form their own social entities to protect their interests.

Based off of public interviews with the Agency and the strategic documents they publish; EMC officials view the main policies of this State Agency for Religious Affairs as a way to silence the

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid

minority demands. The Agency's strategic documents indicate religious minorities as "a threat to state security". A document drafted by the State Agency stated that the government needs to improve the state security regarding the threat from religious minorities. Before the "threat" was seen only in the Pankesi Gorge. Although, recently young Georgian Muslims from the Guria region have left Georgia to join the ranks of ISIS. The boys' families were originally from the Adjara region but had relocated to Guria, an almost entirely Christian region, where they were discriminated against because of their religion which then led to their radicalization.<sup>75</sup>

In these strategic documents the State Agency declares that Muslims who join ISIS are lacking education and this is the main reason for their radicalization. Yet the Agency's reports fail to mention marginalization as a potential reason for their radicalization.

#### 4.3 Kobuleti Madrasa: Religious Freedom Violations at a Societal Level

Up until now I have mostly focused this thesis on the identity framed by the Georgian elite and how the Georgian government contributes to systematically oppressing Muslims. Now I will show how this framing of Christian identity and the Georgian government's oppression has led the Georgian Orthodox community to mobilize against the Georgian Muslim community. First this section will recount the events of the of the Kobuleti madara incident that occurred in 2014, then analyze quotes to illustrate how Georgian Christians are justifying their mobilization against Georgian Muslims.

On September 24, 2014, a pig was slaughtered in front of a Muslim boarding school in Kobuleti, Georgia, and the head was nailed to the door of the establishment. This violation occurred after six months of constant surveillance, verbal harassment, and physical barricades in front of the

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<sup>75</sup> Eka Janashia, "ISIS Warns Georgia," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, December 2015, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/field-reports/item/13312-isis-warns-georgia.html>.

school, which inhibited the ability of students and staff to enter and exit. Local law enforcement officials did nothing to discourage the local community from committing these violations. The protestors who trespassed onto the madrasa's property in order to nail the pig head to the door were not detained. Finally, after pressure was put on the government from local NGOs and international organizations, the government called for the arrest of the violators. When they were arrested they were held for a matter of hours before they received a sentence of "petty hooliganism". A 100 lari fine was issued to the violators and no jail time was required.<sup>76</sup>

The incident in Kobuleti is the most recent highly publicized violation of Muslim minorities' rights in the Adjara region. The interviews done of the local population and the lack of action by the state encompass the current status of the Georgian Muslim minority today. I will analyze quotes taken from interviews done by the Human Rights Center<sup>77</sup> and Democracy and Freedom Watch<sup>78</sup>, in which the local Orthodox Christian population in Kobuleti illustrate the denial of Georgian Muslim self-identity. The first quote comes from the Human Rights Center in which an Orthodox Community member voices their opinion on the opening of the Islamic school and the existence of Georgian Muslims:

"If [...] 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."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Nino Tsagareishvili, "Freedom of Religion in Georgia" (Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia: Human Rights Center, 2015)

<sup>77</sup> 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.

<sup>78</sup> 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.

<sup>79</sup> Nino Tsagareishvili, "Freedom of Religion in Georgia" (Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia: Human Rights Center, 2015)

The denial of Georgian Muslims can be seen as an attempt to protect Georgian Orthodox national identity. In this case, majority Orthodox Georgians want to preserve their Christian identity and deny the existence of Georgian Muslim self-identity.

The next 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.”<sup>80</sup>

This quote is saying they can practice Islam “in their countries, in their lands”, but the interviewee is referring to people from the Adjara region; people who have historically lived in Georgia for centuries and self-identify as Georgian.

This is one of many cases of religious freedom violations in Georgia. The violations against Georgian Muslims in the Adjara region are disconcerting for a number of reasons. Firstly, the group self-identifies as Georgian and is patriotic towards the Georgian state, one that actively oppresses them. Secondly, Georgian Muslims have never made any claim to try to make Georgia into an Islamic nation. In fact, they try to suppress their own religious identity and practices at times in order to be accommodating to the Orthodox Christian majority. Thirdly, they have never had serious claims to secessionism, even though at times throughout history the atmosphere for secessionism in Adjara was ideal. That being said, why does the Georgian government and the Christian majority continue to actively oppress and violate the rights of the Georgian Muslim in Adjara?

Bielefeldt’s theory on religious freedom violations argues, “[Abuses of freedom of religion or belief] are perpetrated in the name of religious truth claims, in the interest of preserving national

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid

identity, for purposes of defending law and order or in the context of counter-terrorism agendas”. Bielefeldt claims 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”.<sup>81</sup> The quotes above shown from the Kobuleti incident show both vulnerability and the feeling of moral superiority and reiterates the idea that Georgian Muslims are not accepted in the Orthodox Georgian national identity and are viewed as unfavorable to the ‘Europeanness’ that Georgians Christians perceive themselves to have.

Thomas Liles’s work on Adjara mentions, “the modern conception of Georgian national identity since the fall of the Soviet Union has come to be associated almost exclusively with Christianity. Simultaneously, young Adjarans’ access to education and economic opportunities often entails relocation to cities and regions where Christianity is the dominant religion. [...] many people in Adjara – particularly younger people – are reconfiguring their religious identities [...] largely in order to be perceived as more legitimate members of the Georgian nation.”<sup>82</sup> The problem with this reality is that Georgian Muslims should not have to be prove to be more ‘legitimate’ members of the Georgian state. They have citizenship, speak Georgian, and are patriotic to the nation. If Georgia aspires to be a true modern European nation, religious identity should not play a role in a persons’ ‘legitimacy’ to their nationality.

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<sup>81</sup> Heiner Bielefeldt, *Freedom of Religion or Belief - A Human Right under Pressure*, vol. 1, 1 (Oxford Journal of Law and Religion, 2015). 27

<sup>82</sup> Thomas Liles, “Islam and Religious Transformation in Adjara,” *European Centre for Minority Protection* 57 (2012).



## Conclusion

Through this thesis I have examined the reasons behind the recent increase in violations towards religious minorities in the Republic of Georgia. Using a frame analysis, I have examined how Georgian elites have framed Georgian identity as being exclusively Christian in order to reshape their national identity after the fall of the Soviet Union, and to reinforce their place in Europe as a Christian nation. The dominant frames that have come up in this thesis include: the historical narrative of Georgians as “protectors of Christianity” and Islam as an ‘other’, Georgian Orthodox Christianity being inseparable from Georgian ethnicity, the Georgian perception of a Christian Europe, and the formation of Georgia’s European identity through Christianity. I have argued that this reinforcement of an exclusively Christian Georgia has excluded religious minorities, by examining the case of the Georgian Muslim population in the Adjara region. The interviews conducted in Georgia provided cases of oppression and discrimination by the Georgian government. These cases show the consequences of the Christian Georgia frames and the unofficial state interests to oppress religious minorities. Finally, I showed how the Georgian government’s framing of a Christian identity and a Muslim ‘other’ has led to Georgian society justifying religious freedom violations against Georgian Muslims in the Adjara region.

The cases of oppression by the Georgian government clearly shows that the EU minority protection stipulations are not being implemented in the Republic of Georgia. In fact, the institutions designed to protect religious minorities are actually contributing to their marginalization. It can be seen through the creation of the State Agency for Religious Affairs and the state-funded Department of Muslims, that the Georgian government has unofficial interests in marginalizing the Muslim minority community. Although Georgia is moving closer to EU accession, it will not be considered a candidate country for quite some time. Therefore, the minority protection is not predicted to improve any time soon.

Georgia attributes its 'Europeanness' to Christianity while most European countries are moving away from Christian values to more secular and inclusive national values. The Georgian majority's strong sense of Christianity leads to the alienation of religious minorities and an increase of intolerance towards religious minorities.

What is extremely perplexing about this situation – this situation being the systematic oppression by the Georgian government – is that Georgia has already experienced two ethnic conflicts in the last twenty years. As I have shown, the religious intolerance is beginning to take on an ethnic tone as the majority is labeling self-identified Georgian Muslims as ethnically Turkish. As the Georgian government continues to marginalize Georgian Muslims, the community in Adjara has started to form their own NGOs and institutions to protect their rights. Georgian ethnonationalism has proved to be detrimental to the country and the region since the fall of the Soviet Union. Through the two separatist conflicts in Georgia one would hope that the Georgian government could find a way to contain the ethnic and religious nationalism and mobilization that it experienced in the early 1990s, but this does not seem to be the case. Georgia continues to hold on to these aforementioned ethnic conflicts and through this case, appears to be creating more strained relations with minority religious and 'ethnic' groups.

## Appendix

### 1. Map of Republic of Georgia

“Map of Republic of Georgia,” 2016, <http://bettravel.ge/index.php?hide=geadj&lang=en>.



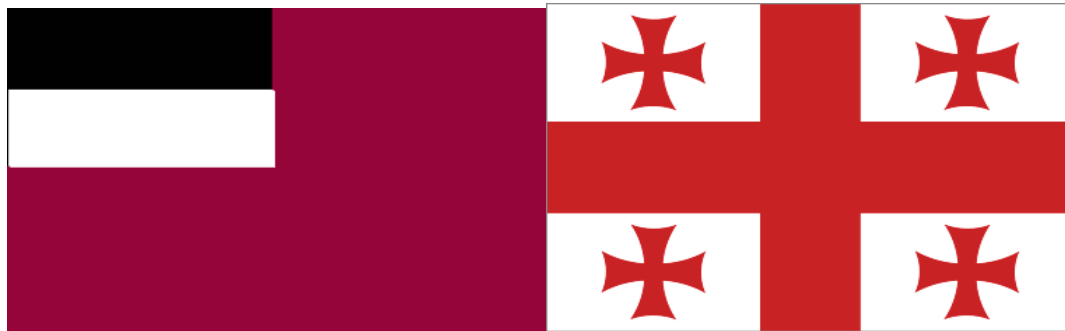
### 2. Map of Adjara

“Map of Adjara – Administrative Territorial Units” 2016, <http://bettravel.ge/index.php?hide=geadj&lang=en>.



3. Georgian National Flags

“Flag of Georgia,” 2012, [http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/ge\\_1918.html](http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/ge_1918.html)



1918-1921, 1990-2004

2004-Present

4. Adjarian Flag

“Adjara (Autonomous Republic, Georgia),” 2012, <http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/ge-ad.html>.



2004- Present

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