

RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF TURKEY'S POLICY IN AJARIA AND THE GEORGIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

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Introduction

The official atheism of Soviet times prevented any abuse of religion for political reasons; perestroika opened the gates; and as soon as the Soviet Union fell apart, its neighbors, Turkey among them, had the opportunity to put pressure on the post-Soviet expanse.

The Turkish political community, which promptly recognized the Soviet Union's disintegration as a chance to establish Turkey's domination in neighboring post-Soviet regions, was euphoric. "The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of new Turkic-Muslim republics opened up a chain of possibilities for Turkey to play an important role in the Caucasus and in Central Asia."¹

The religious factor became as important as political, economic, and other factors.

Turkish-Georgian relations, which have demonstrated a lot of dynamism in the post-Soviet period (approximately since the mid-1990s when Georgia froze its ethno-political conflicts, stabilized its domestic political expanse to a certain extent, and became involved in large-scale energy-communication projects), have not always been that good.

The still unsettled and controversial issue of the status of Ajaria with its large Islamic popula-

tion has been revealing itself during the crises which accompanied the emergence of Georgia's statehood. Igor Muradyan has written the following on that score: "Between 1992 and 2003 Turkey, concerned about infringement on Ajaria's rights, interfered in Georgia's domestic affairs three times."²

While Aslan Abashidze was in power, Turkey competed with Russia in that part of the Caucasus; as soon as the Russian military base was pulled out of Batumi and relations between Moscow and Tbilisi deteriorated, Turkey became one of the key foreign policy actors in Ajaria. During the Tbilisi-Batumi confrontation triggered by the Rose Revolution, Turkey warned Tbilisi, in so many words, that it was closely following the slightest shifts in the border regions. On 17 March, 2004, Ambassador of Turkey to Azerbaijan Unal Chevikoç declared that, under the Treaty of Kars of 1921, Ankara could move its troops into Ajaria in the event of a crisis. In this way, Turkish diplomats responded to the statement Georgian Ambassador to Russia Konstantine Kemularia made on 16 March to the effect that the Treaty of Kars, under which Batumi was transferred to Georgia, had become null and void.³

¹ M. Çelikpala, "From a Failed State to a Weak One? Georgia and Turkish-Georgian Relations," in: *The Turkish Yearbook*, Vol. XXXV, p. 171, available at [http://www.politics.ankara.edu.tr/dosyalar/MMTY/36/7_mithat_celikpala.pdf].

² I. Muradyan, *Regionalnaya politika SShA i Velikobritainii: Turtsia-Iran-Yuzhny Kavkaz-Chernoe more*, Erevan, 2008, p. 113.

³ See: "Posol Turtsii v Baku: 'Ankara imeet pravo vvesti voyska v Ajariiu'," available at [<http://www.regnum.ru>], 17 March, 2004.

On 18 March, 2004, Yaşar Yakiş, former foreign minister of Turkey, who headed a Turkish delegation to Georgia, refuted Chevikož's statement by saying that his country had no right to interfere in the developments around Ajaria and "had no such intention."⁴ Ankara obviously wanted much stronger influence in the region; the autonomous status of Ajaria, a republic with a large Muslim population, offers certain opportunities.

⁴ See: I. Muradyan, op. cit., pp. 113-114.

On the eve and immediately after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Georgia paid, and continues to pay, much attention to Christian Orthodoxy in Ajaria; its further spread is invariably treated as a political issue; the Georgian Orthodox Church, likewise, attaches much importance to Orthodoxy in Ajaria.

Here I am going to write about Orthodox Christians and Muslims, the two groups bearing the main responsibility for maintaining the religious balance in the Ajarian Autonomy and wielding a lot of political and other influence.

Islam in Ajaria and Turkish Policy

Today, Ajaria is a multi-confessional region with Orthodox Christians and Muslims comprising most of its population. According to the Department of Statistics and the Georgian Ministry for Economics and Development, in 2002 there were 240,552 Orthodox Christians in Ajaria; 115,161 Muslims; 3,162 followers of the Gregorian Church; 683 Catholics; 161 Judaists; and 16,297 followers of other confessions.⁵

Islam, in the form of Sunni Hanafi madhab, came to Ajaria in the latter part of the 16th century together with the Ottoman Turks who defeated the Persians in yet another war and drove them out of the region.

According to G. Sanikidze and E.W. Walker, "the region of Ajaria was Islamized quite late... Islamicization began after Ajaria was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire ... and especially accelerated after the 1820s."⁶ They have written that "for the most part, Ajarians have traditionally thought of themselves as 'Georgians' (their native language is Georgian),"⁷ while ethnic and linguistic ties prevailed over confessional. "However, during Ottoman rule, the Turkish authorities had some success in changing the region's political identification."⁸

Under the Treaty of San Stefano of 3 March, 1878 (which ended the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878), Ajaria became part of the Russian Empire (confirmed by the Berlin Congress and the Constantinople Peace Treaty of 27 February, 1879), which moved in to re-Christianize the local people.

Part of the Ajarian population (the political elite in particular) preserved the political orientation inherited from the Ottoman rule.⁹ During World War I, for example, Ajaria had its share of fighting; some of the locals fought together with Turks against the Russian Caucasian Army.¹⁰

⁵ See: [<http://www.statistics.ge/files/english/census/2002/Religious%20beliefs.pdf>]. These figures should be treated cautiously, but they cannot be avoided here.

⁶ G. Sanikidze, E.W. Walker, *Islam and Islamic Practices in Georgia*, University of California, Institute of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies, Berkeley, 2004, p. 6 (for more detail about the past of Ajaria, see: A.Kh. Abashidze, *Ajaria: Istorija, diplomatia, mezhdunarodnoe pravo*, Moscow, 1998; and also, Z. Margiev, *Batum vo vremena Osmanskoy imperii. Kratkiy administrativny, statisticheskiy i istoricheskiy obzor g. Batuma i regiona vo vremena Osmanskoy imperii*, Moscow, 2005).

⁷ G. Sanikidze, E.W. Walker, op. cit., p. 7.

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Compare with G.M. Derluguian, "The Tale of Two Resorts: Abkhazia and Ajaria Before and Since the Soviet Collapse," in: *The Myth of Ethnic Conflict: Politics, Economics and Cultural Violence*, ed. by B. Crawford, R.D. Lipschutz, Berkeley, 1998, p. 276.

¹⁰ See: A. Arutyunyan, *Kavkazskiy front. 1914-1917 gg.*, Erevan, 1971, pp. 160-161.

There were movements and organizations in Ajaria which agitated for unification with Turkey¹¹; without going into greater detail about this far from simple time, let me say that Art VI of the Treaty of Kars registered Ajaria's autonomous status. This was possible because it had preserved its Muslim population (or, rather, it was used as a weighty argument in favor of Ajaria's autonomy). Under the same treaty, Turkey was made a guarantor of this status.¹²

I have already written that it would be wrong to say that there was a religious revival in Soviet times; while steering clear of the legal principles of the interpretation of the Treaty of Kars, I shall point out here that in the wake of the Soviet Union's disappearance Turkey spared no effort to return the Georgians of Ajaria to their Muslim roots. The religious boom of sorts that began in the late 1980s in the Soviet Union and stretched into the post-Soviet 1990s added vigor to the Turks' frantic efforts.

At the early stages, part of the Muslim population of Ajaria consolidated to oppose what Georgia's first president Zviad Gamsakhurdia was doing. He linked the Georgian national identity and Christian Orthodoxy in a primitive and crude way that could not but cause protest. On 22-23 April, 1991, in Batumi, people rallied together to protest against the ruling Round Table bloc to impose Christianity on the Ajarian Muslims and destroy the republic's autonomy.¹³

This was the first and the only high wave of political protests with religious undertones in the republic. Under Abashidze, a past master of meandering among the ethnoconfessional groups and regional and extra-regional power centers, there were no social and political storms, but the religious sphere was far from stagnant. I have already written that the Soviet Union's disintegration was followed by an upsurge of religious feelings which tempted all sorts of official and informal organizations to try to capitalize on them.

Followers of notorious Fethullah Gülen were the first to penetrate Ajaria; they arrived while the Soviet Union was still alive. Nikolai Kireev has written the following on that score: "On 11 January, 1990, the first group of Islamist missionaries crossed the border into Georgia at Sarpi and visited Ajaria and Tbilisi. It was warmly received everywhere. In May, the second mission of 37 set off in several cars and a bus loaded with presents. It visited Batumi, Tbilisi, Kazan, Ganja, Baku, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. This was how Gülen's community started its missionary activities..."¹⁴

By the mid-2000s, followers of Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan (1888-1959), who preached ideas of Said Nursî (1873-1960), joined the Gülen supporters.

Missionaries, the Gülen followers in particular, were engaged in diverse and frequently clandestine activities: propagandizing Islam as they interpreted it; conscripting young men willing to study Islam abroad; disseminating religious literature; organizing all sorts of charity events; funding the building of new and restoration of old mosques; setting up new madrassahs, etc. By the early-mid-2000s, supporters of Mustafa Sungur (himself a pupil of Tunahan) ran 6 madrassahs in Batumi's out-

¹¹ See: A.Kh. Abashidze, op. cit., p. 242.

¹² Art VI.1 of the Treaty of Kars said: "Turkey agrees to cede to Georgia suzerainty over the town and port of Batum, with the territory to the north of the frontier, indicated in Article IV of the present Treaty, which formed part of the district of Batum, on the condition: 1. That the population of the localities specified in the present Article shall enjoy a greater measure of local administrative autonomy, that each community is guaranteed its cultural and religious rights, and that this population may introduce in the above-mentioned places an agrarian system in conformity with its own wishes (see: *Treaty of Friendship between Turkey, the Socialist Soviet Republic of Armenia, the Azerbaijan Socialist Soviet Republic, and the Socialist Soviet Republic of Georgia, signed in Kars on 13 October, 1921*, available at [<http://groong.usc.edu/treaties/kars.html>]).

¹³ See: *Vlast*, 29 April, 1991.

¹⁴ N. Kireev, "Turkey at the Dawn of the 21st Century: Landmarks for Political Islam," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (20), 2003, pp. 85-86.

skirts; while the pupils of Gülen ran one madrassah.¹⁵ A small group of members of the Naqshbandi Order led by Mahmut Ustaosmanoğlu also tried to step up their activity.¹⁶

At essentially the same time, Diyanet Isleri Baskanligi (the Presidency for the Religious Affairs of Turkey) joined the process; it established contacts with the Muftiate, the official structure which represented the Muslims of Ajaria; it relied on the Turkish consulate in Baku to spread Islamic literature, appoint its own clerics, and select students for religious courses and theological departments of Turkish universities.¹⁷

In 2006 alone, 29 young Ajarians came to study at a religious school in Turkey (in İnegöl).¹⁸ In 2008, Head Mufti of Ajaria Bekir Bolkvadze decided to send 49 young men abroad to study the Koran.¹⁹

In this way, the post-Soviet generation of Muslims had to study the fundamentals of their religion in Turkey: it was the closest country, while their own country could not offer an adequate education. This made the “new” Islamic youth a vehicle of sorts of the interests of the Turkic clerical circles, which stirred up quite justified concerns in the Georgian secular and religious communities.

The Georgian diaspora in Turkey did a lot to spread Islam in Georgia. Deputy Head of the Union of Muslims of Georgia I. Saydaev offered the following comment: “I would like to point out that the Georgian diaspora in Turkey is especially active; it translates and promotes Islamic literature among the faithful of our country. Regrettably, they have limited themselves to Ajaria and are doing next to nothing in other parts of Georgia. Recently I visited their center in Istanbul where we agreed to coordinate our efforts and support each other.”²⁰

In fact, it was the missionaries of the informal Islamic structures mentioned above, rather than the Diyanet, who demonstrated a lot of vigor in Ajaria. “The above-mentioned structures are much more effective than the Diyanet...”²¹

In Ajaria, the Diyanet keeps its distance from the Nursists and prefers not to flaunt its contacts with them. The relations between the Nursists and the Turkish military establishment are far from easy, but they are free to carry out propaganda in other places. The Turkish authorities like the arrangement because they can distance themselves from the Nursists in the event of complications.

Whether or not the Nursists in Ajaria had the blessing of the Presidency of Religious Affairs of Turkey and the Turkish special services, there is a more or less commonly accepted opinion that Ankara, which was seeking greater influence in the autonomous republic through revived Islam and its proliferation, profited from the Nursists’ activities.

It should be said that the Turkish sources are reluctant to comment on this aspect of Turkish activities in Ajaria; their scope, however, remains the same and has been very visible in the mushrooming of new and restored mosques and prayer houses since the mid-1990s.

While denying that they received aid, Mufti Bolkvadze admitted: “There is a madrassah in Batumi which functions on private donations. We do not receive money from foreign states; I can add that we do not receive money from the Georgian authorities either.”²² This scope of construction, however, could not have been realized without outside help.²³

¹⁵ See: B. Balci, “Is There a Place for Islam in Michael Saakashvili’s Christian Georgia?” available at [http://www.caucas.com/home_eng/breve_content.Php?id=180], 25 August, 2005.

¹⁶ See: B. Balci, R. Motika, *Religion et Politique dans le Caucase post-sovietique*, Paris, 2007, p. 243.

¹⁷ See: S. Mkrtchian, “Musulmane Gruzii,” available at [http://www.religions.am/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2999:МусульманеГрузии&catid=1:2009-02-27-03-45-54&Itemid=11]

¹⁸ See: [<http://www.sngnews.ru>], 25 January, 2006.

¹⁹ See: “Ketevan edet v Turtsiiu?” available at [<http://www.golos.am>], 22 July 2008.

²⁰ I. Saydaev, “Musulmane Gruzii nadeiutsia, chto do voyny s Rossiey ne doynet,” available at [<http://www.islam.ru/pressclub/gost/saidaev/>].

²¹ B. Balci, op. cit.

²² “Adzharskie musulmane v politiku ne vmeshivaiutsia,” available at [<http://www.ccrghouse.ge/gazeti/9/3/.htm>].

²³ The new minaret was added to the Batumi mosque using Turkish money (for more detail, see: G. Sanikidze, E.W. Walker, op. cit., p. 13).

In 2002, the media reported on about 102 mosques in Ajaria²⁴; in 2005, there was mention of 137²⁵; and in 2006, this number had risen to 159.²⁶ There is information that in 2008 there were 174 mosques in Ajaria.²⁷

This information serves propaganda purposes as well: in some cases these are not classical mosques (the Orta Jame Mosque in Batumi built in 1866 by the Khimshiashvili family is the best example of a classical mosque), but buildings of all sorts adapted to religious purposes.

Despite the far from perfect laws and practically absent legal base, the activities of some of the ethnoconfessional (or confessional) groups were limited to some extent. On the other hand, it was not easy to control construction projects (many of them unsanctioned) or the restoration of all sorts of religious-cultic objects (or buildings adapted to cultic needs). Certain issues are still unresolved: how many functioning objects of this sort there are in the republic and how many are needed to meet the people's spiritual requirements, etc.

This fully applies to the religious Muslim facilities across Georgia. According to Ruslan Baramidze's field studies conducted in 2003-2008, there were over 150 buildings of all types adapted to serve the religious and educational needs of the local population: 95 of them were mosque-schools; 41 were mosques; 18 Islamic educational establishments; and 2 buildings of other types.²⁸

The inflow of Turkish missionaries, the steadily increasing number of prayer houses, and many other things could have been taken as signs of spiritual renaissance and stronger spiritual and cultural ties were it not for Turkey's own actions at various stages of its relations with Georgia and outspokenness of certain people.

For example, Chairman of the Union of Friendly Relations with Georgia E. Şekerçi, a lawyer, said in one of his interviews: "It is in Turkey's national interests to keep Georgia Muslim. If the Georgian Muslims embrace Christianity they will oppose Islam and Turkey. The Muslims of Georgia love Turkey or at least respect it. Those who embrace Christianity will defend the official ideology; this means that Turkey should work with the Muslims of Georgia. This is its right and this is its duty... In this region, autonomy rests on Islam. If they destroy Islam, they will also be destroying the region's autonomy."²⁹

From this it follows that Turkey was pursuing its own interests through the following tactical tasks:

- (1) maintaining the Muslim community in Ajaria;
- (2) adding political dimensions to Islam if possible;
- (3) restoring the possibility of inculcating a pro-Turkish orientation among the elite and some of the local people lost during Soviet power.

If realized, these tasks and wider economic ties with Ajaria could help Turkey build up its influence in the region and, in the distant future, turn it into a zone of its exclusive influence.

This means that no matter how doubtful the provisions of the Treaty of Kars look today, the very fact that there are Muslims in Ajaria is a prerequisite for Turkey's continued influence there.

Activities of the Georgian Orthodox Church

From the very beginning, Turkish missionaries have been aware of the limiting impact of the Georgian Orthodox Church, a very influential force; at first its activities were synchronized with the

²⁴ See: "V mechetiakh Adzharii izuchaiut arabskiy iazyk," available at [<http://www.pravoslavie.ru>], 2 December, 2002.

²⁵ See: "Adzharskie musulmane v politiku ne vmeshivaiutsia."

²⁶ [<http://www.pravoslavie.ru>], 5 June, 2006.

²⁷ See: "Ketevan edet v Turtsiiu?"

²⁸ See: R. Baramidze, *Islam and the Muslims of Ajaria (historical-ethnographic and socio-cultural aspects)*, Batumi, 2008, p. 167 (in Georgian).

²⁹ [<http://www.milligazette.com>], 4 November 2006.

nationalist movement, which became obvious in the latter half of the 1980s and which appealed, among other things, to Orthodoxy.³⁰

The Constitutional Agreement (the so-called Georgian Concordat) signed on 14 October, 2002 by the Georgian state and the Georgian Orthodox Church and ratified on 22 October, 2002 by the parliament and the Holy Synod added weight to the Church.³¹

The Orthodox Church, which acted with much more subtlety than Zviad Gamsakhurdia and never asked the embarrassing question, “Are you Turks or Georgians?”, achieved a sort of spiritual and cultural consolidation between the Ajarians and the rest of the country. The Church appealed to the Ajarians’ past, but never opposed them to the people in the rest of the country. During one of his visits to Batumi, Patriarch Ilia II said: “The people who live here are our blood and flesh. Ominously many were converted to Islam, but they know very well where their roots are and where our salvation is... This is the Christian religion and thanks God that people convert to their ancestral faith again.”³² The Georgian Orthodox Church accepted the multi-confessional nature of Ajaria and deemed it necessary to remind the people of their Christian past (according to legends, Apostles Matthew and Andrew The First Called brought Christianity to Ajaria in the 1st century).

The Church does not limit itself to reviving Christian roots, that is, to purely religious activities. Its active preaching of Orthodoxy is explained by its good knowledge of the region. Solomon Inaishvili, Co-Chairman of the Evangelism Department of the Batumi and Skhalt Eparchy and Editor of the *Put k khramu* journal (former minister of agriculture and minister of education of Ajaria), said: “In Soviet time we knew who we were, where we were from, and in which direction we should head, but we were communists. On the one hand, many rejected Islam because of vehement anti-Turkish propaganda. As a NATO member, Turkey was an enemy of the U.S.S.R. On the other hand, atheist propaganda kept us away from Orthodox Christians. *Some places in Ajaria, for example the zone that bordered on Turkey, were very Muslim and dangerous* (italics mine.—V.I.). In 1991, Georgia declared its independence, the political situation changed, and we acquired the opportunity to go back to our roots... The Christianization of Ajaria is associated with the national-liberation movement of Georgia; it raised a high wave of enthusiasm thanks to the efforts of our patriarch, His Grace Dimitry (Shiolashvili) (who was Father David at that time), and devoted priests, fathers Grigory Abuladze, Zakary Peradze, Seraphim Beridze, and Mirian Samkharadze.”³³

The Georgian priests concentrated on the Muslim areas of Ajaria, in the Khulo and Keda districts with Muslim majorities. Mathijs Pelkmans has written the following: “In the 1990s, the Georgian Orthodox Church regarded Khulo as the prime location for its missionary activity in Upper Ajaria.”³⁴

Late in the 1980s, a spiritual school and grammar school were opened in Khulo; another grammar school and a seminary were opened in Batumi.³⁵ Some time later (in 1989), a monastery was opened in Skhalt; it was approximately at the same time that the practice of mass baptism became very popu-

³⁰ Compare with A. Chelidze, “Etnicheskiy natsionalizm v dukhovenstve Gruzinskoj Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi,” in: *Iuzhnyy Kavkaz: territorii, istorii, liudi*, Collection of articles No. 2, Heinrich Böll Foundation, Tbilisi, 2006, p. 137.

³¹ The text can be found at [http://www.patriarchate.ge/_en/?action=eklesia-saxelmcfifo].

³² T. Khalvashi, N. Batiashvili, “‘Can Muslim be a Georgian?’ Historic Overview of Discourse on Georgian ‘Essence’,” available at [<http://api.ning.com/files/CanMuslimbeaGeorgian.doc/>], p. 16.

³³ A. Nikiforova, “Pravoslavnoe vozrozhdenie v Ajarii,” available at [<http://www.newsgeorgia.ru/geo1/20060527/41734739.html>]; [<http://www.pravoslavie.ru/cgi-bin/sykon/client/display.pl?sid=364&did=1119>]; early in the 1960s, future Patriarch Ilia II served in the Batumi cathedral (see: L. Kolesnikov, “Religioznaia obstanovka v Gruzii,” in: *Gruzia: problemy i perspektivy razvitiya*, Vol. 2, RISI, Moscow, 2002, p. 322).

³⁴ M. Pelkmans, “Baptized Georgians: Religious Conversion to Christianity in Autonomous Ajaria,” Max Plank Institute for Social Anthropology, *Working Papers*, No. 71, 2005, p. 6.

³⁵ See: L. Kolesnikov, op. cit., p. 322.

lar. On 1 June, 1989, 5,000 people were baptized in Batumi; the same day, about 500 were baptized in Skhalt.³⁶ On 13 May, 1991, 5,000 atheists and Muslims were baptized in Batumi.³⁷

This practice continued in the 2000s. In 2003, 300 Lazes living in Sarpi on the Turkish-Georgian border were baptized.³⁸ Under different pretexts, Muslims were moved from Ajaria to other regions to be replaced by Christian Georgians.³⁹

The success of the “Ajarian March” of the new authorities inspired the Georgian Orthodox Church. While Abashidze preferred to balance out the confessional communities, the new people brought to power by the Rose Revolution needed the Church on their side and were actively involved in all sorts of events it organized. In 2004, for example, many secular figures, including Premier Zurab Zhvania, deemed it necessary to attend the foundation-laying ceremony for a new church in Sarpi.⁴⁰

In 2004, the top figures in the Administration of the Spiritual Mufti of Ajaria lost their posts partly because under Mufti Kamashidze the Muftiate lost control over re-Islamization in the region.⁴¹

Removal of Mufti Mahmud (Avtandil) Kamashidze left many people baffled because the most popular candidate—Z. Tsetskhladze, educated in Turkey—was not unequivocally accepted (it is hard to say whether this was true or not). Bekir (Bezhan) Bolkvadze was elected the 7th mufti.⁴²

The Muftiate, the official structure of the Muslims of Ajaria, was also reorganized⁴³; the same year it received new regulations, Point 2 of which said: “The Muftiate is an independent body set up to bring people of the Muslim faith together and represent them on the basis of the Shari‘a across the territory of the Ajarian Autonomous Republic.”⁴⁴

The country’s new leaders obviously wanted a tighter grip on the Muslim clergy (or, at least, on the official structures) in an effort to minimize possible foreign influence. The Regulations and the Muftiate’s autonomous status made it more independent when dealing with alternative Muslim structures.

The above and Saakashvili’s statement of 5 May, 2004, which established direct presidential rule in Ajaria (until “election of the republic’s new head,” which has not yet taken place), certain legal changes, as well as other factors (the exceptional legal and political status of the Georgian Orthodox Church translated into advantages when it came to disseminating its ideas, tolerance of the local people, and personal qualities of certain hierarchs of the Church, etc.), made Ajaria’s autonomous status purely symbolic and strengthened the position of the Georgian Orthodox Church in its fight for “souls.”

The Church was given fresh impetus, which raised another wave of mass baptisms. According to the media, on 1 June, 2004, commemorated as the day St. Nino, Equal-to-the-Apostles, arrived in Georgia, over 1,000 people were baptized in the village of Zvara (the Keda District).⁴⁵ On 17 June,

³⁶ See: [<http://www.religio.ru>], 10 May, 2005.

³⁷ See: A. Nikiforova, op. cit.

³⁸ See: [<http://www.pravoslavie.ru/cgi-bin/sykon/client/display.pl?sid=363&did=1286>].

³⁹ There is recent information about another group of Ajarians moved elsewhere (see: “Adzhartsev pereseliut v armionaselenny rayon Gruzii (Javakheti),” available at [<http://www.regnum.ru>], 25 June, 2010).

⁴⁰ See: “U gruzino-turetskoy granitsy nachalos stroitelstvo pravoslavnoy tserkvi—pervoy za 600 let,” available at [<http://www.abkhaziainfo.org>], 2 September 2004.

⁴¹ See: R. Baramidze, op. cit., p. 165.

⁴² See: “Saakashvili’s Ajara Success: Repeatable Elsewhere in Georgia?” *EUROPE Briefing*, Tbilisi/Brussels, 18 August, 2004, International Crisis Group, p. 3.

⁴³ See: S. Mkrtchian, op. cit.

⁴⁴ R. Baramidze, op. cit., p. 162.

⁴⁵ See: [<http://www.pravoslavie.ru/cgi-bin/sykon/client/display.pl?sid=363&did=1286>; <http://www.georgia-orthodoxy.ru>], 3 June, 2004.

2004, 200 people from the Ajarian village of Chkhutumeti (in the River Chorokhi gorge) were baptized on the Republican Party's initiative; and a 15 meter-high cross was erected in close proximity to the Turkish border.⁴⁶ On 7 May, 2005, St. George's Church was opened in Shuakhevi (Oladauri) and 200 people were baptized.⁴⁷ On 27 May, 2006, 50 Muslims converted to Christianity in Batumi.⁴⁸ In July 2006, in Kobuleti, 300 Muslims adopted Orthodox Christianity; this was the third such event in this seaside town.⁴⁹ Late in 2008, according to certain sources, about 200 people from the Ajarian village of Kakuti (not far from Kobuleti) were baptized in the Chorokhi River.⁵⁰

More often than not, despite the commonly triumphant tone of similar reports, it remains unclear whether all those baptized were Muslims or unbaptized people who regarded themselves as Christians. Numerous reports about the miracles of proselytism looked more like information warfare than anything else.

Mathijs Pelkmans has offered the following comment: "Although the Church may have interpreted the numerous baptisms (estimates of the actual number vary greatly) as confirmation of its hope that the Ajarians would rapidly 'return' to Christianity, it was difficult not to see these baptisms as opportunistic adjustment to the times or as symbolic gestures toward the nationalist movement."⁵¹

The frequency and regularity of these events show that the Georgian Church remains active, especially at the information and propaganda level.

It seems that the powers that be and the Georgian Orthodox Church are pursuing two main aims:

- (1) downplaying the impact of the Islamic factor in Ajaria;
- (2) settling the old problem of Georgian statehood, viz. rallying all sub-ethnicities around the idea of Orthodox unity, which Ilia Chavchavadze formulated as Motherland, Language, and Faith.

In any case, both the Orthodox and Muslim leaders were pursuing not so much religious as political aims: it was thought that if the people changed their faith this would lead to a change in the national (or political) identity.

O. Zoidze and D. Berdzenishvili have the following to say on this score: "The increased Christian and Muslim activities in Ajaria today have very little to do with religious feelings; they are aimed more at making religion a factor of the national identity. Those Ajarians who regard themselves as an autonomous part of the Georgians regard Islam as confirmation of this autonomy and its continued existence. For the other Ajarians, Christianity is a means to overcome autonomy."⁵²

Recently, leaks about talks between Georgia and Turkey on cultural monuments on their territories stirred up a public and political discourse on Turkey's stronger religious influence in Ajaria and Georgia. It turned out that under the proposed agreement, Turkey pledged to restore two mosques in Javakheti and a mosque and a jami in Ajaria; this caused ambiguous responses in Georgia.

⁴⁶ See: "V Adzharii krestilis eshche 200 musulman," available at [<http://www.sedmitza.ru/news/306842.html>]; [<http://www.georgia.orthodoxy.ru/calendar00.htm>], 18 June, 2004.

⁴⁷ See: [<http://www.pravoslavie.ru>], 7 May, 2005.

⁴⁸ See: "V Adzharii priniali kreshchenie 50 gruzinskikh musulman," available at [<http://www.newsgeorgia.ru>], 27 May, 2006.

⁴⁹ See: N. Landru, "In Georgia Religious Minorities Remain in the Shadow," available at [<http://www.caucas.com>], 8 February, 2007.

⁵⁰ See: "Massovoe kreshchenie v Adzharii," available at [<http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/468845.html>].

⁵¹ M. Pelkmans, op. cit., p. 3.

⁵² O. Zoidze, D. Berdzenishvili, "Protivostoianie mezhdru Tbilisi i Batumi, ili o problemakh sobrannosti natsii i polno gosudarstva," *Tsentralnaia Azia i Kavkaz*, No. 2 (8), 2000, p. 216.

The Georgian Orthodox Church was the first to sound the alarm. In his written address dated 18 January, 2010, Patriarch of Georgia said: “We believe that this agreement in its present form is unacceptable because while there are 240 functioning jamis and mosques (140 of them are found in Ajaria), as well as 8 madrassahs (and secular educational institutions) in Georgia, there is not a single functioning Orthodox church in Turkey.”⁵³

The public fears stronger Turkish influence in Ajaria in particular. According to Academician N. Bolkvadze, who was born in Ajaria: “Turkey’s influence in Ajaria is mounting by the day. The Turks own the best land and best hotels. Azizie Square and Erdoğan Lake are located in Batumi; Turkish companies hire local people, whom they treat as slaves. While Turks are paid 1,000 lari and more, Georgians can hardly hope to receive 120 lari. Ajarians, including Muslims, are dead set against the planned Mosque of Azizie.”⁵⁴

David Batsikadze, head of the local Conservatives, was likewise concerned: “Turkey is declared to be our friend, but this state has its own interests in Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Syria. This is true of all the former empires. If the Azizie Mosque is finally built, the Turks will start saying that this was their territory. Today, they teach their children in schools that this was their land which the Russians took away from them and gave to the Georgians.”⁵⁵

On 23 March, 2011, Batumi was swept by a protest rally staged as a warning (which brought together up to 2,000 Christians and Muslims). Contrary to what the authorities expected and feared, there were no xenophobic slogans or religious confrontation. In their address to the Georgian authorities and the Consul-General of Turkey in Batumi, the protesters said: “We, who have gathered at the burial site of warriors who perished 90 years ago when fighting for the liberation of Batumi, have passed a resolution:

- “1. Talks between Georgia and Turkey on cultural monuments should become public and should take into account the constitutional agreement with the Georgian Orthodox Church.
- “2. We regard as unacceptable talks between two secular states on building cultic objects. At that same time, we greet the efforts of the two states to protect their cultural heritage.
- “3. We regard as unacceptable the intention to build a copy of the Azizie Mosque of the time of the Ottoman Empire in Batumi.”⁵⁶

The above suggests that the Patriarchate and part of the Georgian public obviously disapproved of the talks on building Turkish mosques in Georgia.

This brings to mind a scandal which shook Ajaria in 2007. In the small hours of 18 May, 2007, a church being built in the Khelvachauri District (on Peria Mountain) was razed to the ground. Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia Ilia II said that this was “deplorable,” while Chairman of the District Administration B. Shavlidze hastened to clarify that the mountain was a “strategic object” which offered a bird’s eye view of the entire republic; the unsanctioned building should be removed.

Bolkvadze, then head of the Ajarian Muslims, said that encroachments on sacred places, be it a mosque, synagogue, or church, should not be tolerated.⁵⁷

⁵³ N. Devdariani, “Novy muzey okkupatsii pod vidom druzhby s Turtsiey,” available at [<http://www.kavkazoved.info/news/2011/04/17/novyj-muzej-okkupacii-pod-vidom-druzhby-s-turciej.htm>].

⁵⁴ Ibidem.

⁵⁵ Ibidem.

⁵⁶ Ibidem.

⁵⁷ See: “V Adzharii snesen stroiashchisya pravoslavny khram,” available at [<http://www.blagovest-info>], 21 May, 2007.

I have already written that the people brought to power by the Rose Revolution needed the Georgian Orthodox Church on their side; today, however, their position on religious matters is frequently ambiguous.

There is a commonly accepted opinion that the secular authorities either latently support the active position of the Georgian Orthodox Church or consolidate its position, either directly or indirectly. For example, in the summer of 2010, Zurab (Kemal) Tsetskhladze, the newly appointed Head Mufti of Ajaria (he assumed the post in 2009), had to resign because of a scandal (caused by the decision to confiscate the building of a local Muslim school) between the people living in the Khulo settlement up in the mountains and the government of Ajaria. According to one of the locals, the authorities demanded that the Head Mufti liquidate the village Muslim school. Tsetskhladze refused and left his post, allegedly for health reasons. The Mufti Administration of Ajaria replaced him with Jemal Paksadze,⁵⁸ who was not as popular as his predecessor but obviously a much better diplomat.⁵⁹

The Administration of the Muslims of Georgia (UMG) was set up early in May 2011 with the obvious (albeit undeclared) intention to tighten control over the country's Muslim community (not only of Ajaria's).

The new structure intended to control the Islamic communities and mosques; on 12 June, 2011, Jemal Paksadze was re-elected Head Mufti; Vagif Akafilov became Chief Sheikh while Ya. Aliev was elected Chief Imam.

This means that the secular authorities of Georgia are not always inclined to side with the Georgian Orthodox Church, not only because its relations with the local confessions are fairly complicated, but because there are other external factors (mainly related to Ajaria) discussed below.

Other Factors

Confronted with the activities of the Georgian Orthodox Church supported (at the early stages) by Saakashvili's government and for other reasons, Ankara had to revise its policy in Ajaria. There is a more or less justified opinion that by supporting, on the sly, all sorts of Islamic missionaries, the Turks were gradually building up their economic presence in Ajaria and were determined to increase Georgia's geopolitical and geo-economic dependence on Turkey. In February 2011, at a meeting in Batumi with Turkish businessmen, Foreign Minister of Turkey Davutoğlu did not beat about the bush; he said that Ankara considered them a vanguard of Turkey's foreign policies.⁶⁰

In fact, Turkey's share in the economy of Ajaria is big enough and is increasing through joint trade and economic projects, investments in tourism, etc.

The Turkish TAV&Urban Company modernized the Tbilisi international airport and built a new terminal; under the same agreement signed on 6 September, 2005, it reconstructed the Batumi airport.

On 14 March, 2006, the sides signed an agreement on intergovernmental use of the Batumi airport (ratified in April 2006 by the Georgian parliament). The Turks pledged to spend \$95 million on

⁵⁸ See: "Gravny muftiy Adzharii ushel s dolzhnosti," available at [<http://www.blagovest-info.ru/index.php?ss=2&ss=3&id=35235%3E>] (see also: <http://religiebi.info/index.php?a=main&pid=17&lang=eng>).

⁵⁹ More than that. In his article L. Sutidze pointed out: "A large number of villages does not trust the Muftiat. Peasants say that they did not elect the mufti and therefore mistrusted him" (see: L. Sutidze, "Face towards Mecca, Heart to Homeland," available at [<http://www.tabula.ge/en/article-2161.html>]).

⁶⁰ See: M. Kaçar, "Davutoğlu, Gürcistan'ın Acara Özerk Cumhuriyeti'nde Türk işadamları ile bir araya geldi," 11 February, 2011, available at [<http://www.dha.com.tr/haberdetay.asp?tarikh=29.05.2011&Newsid=141602&Categoryd=5>].

the reconstruction projects in Tbilisi and Batumi (\$62 million were allocated for the Tbilisi project; \$15 million for Batumi); in ten more years, the Turks were to invest the rest (\$18 million) in latest technologies and infrastructure for both airports.

The reconstructed Batumi airport was opened with a great deal of pomp on 26 May, 2007; it became known that the company involved in reconstruction would assume administrative functions in the near future.

On 8 June, 2006, a Turkish delegation from the city of Rize invited Ajaria to cooperate in building tea-packing factories on its territory.

Strategic interests are not the only reason for Turkey's involvement in Ajaria; there are commercial interests as well; the tourist and economic capabilities of Ajaria are no less attractive.

Executive Director of BTM textile plant in Batumi Cezmi Akşahin admitted that Turkish businessmen are attracted by the relatively cheap labor, electric power, etc. His plant was commissioned in September 2007.

On 26 May, 2007, two clothes factories, in Makhinjauri and Khulo (90% of the population of which are Muslim), were opened in Ajaria on Turkish money. According to certain sources, the Makhinjauri factory was to employ 900; and the Khulo factory 300. There are other examples of that sort.⁶¹

There is the opinion in the expert community that Turkey is zealously guarding its geopolitical and geo-economic interests. N. Oravelashvili, for example, has written that when constructed the Kars-Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi-Baku (KATB) railway might take away part of freights now moved through the Georgian ports of Batumi and Poti: "The capacity of the railway which carried the freights between Baku and the two Georgian ports is 18 million tons (sic!—*V.I.*); the new railway will handle up to 15 million tons. If 15 million out of the previous 18 million are sent along the new railway the Georgian ports will lose a great deal of business. This will shatter them." This explains Turkey's lukewarm attitude to the planned modernization of the Batumi sea port.⁶²

It is becoming more and more clear that Georgia's independent role in the emerging geopolitical Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan axis might decrease together with the freedom of political maneuvering (strange as it may seem in view of BTC, BTE, and the talks about the Georgian route of the still unrealized Nabucco and KATB projects).

Theoretically speaking, there is any number of actors ready to move into the niche left by Russia in its relations with Georgia (even though the presence of Russian capital in Georgia is considerable).

By Way of a Conclusion

There are no signs that the political dimension of religion will recede into the background any time soon. The status of Ajaria, which closely depends on the continued presence of the Muslim population, shows that any of the actors involved may try to invoke religion to camouflage their political

⁶¹ For more detail about economic cooperation between Georgia and Turkey, see my article: V. Ivanov, "Nekotorye aspekty turetsko-gruzinskogo ekonomicheskogo vzaimodeystvia: ekonomika, determinirovannaia politikoy," in: *Turtsia: energetika i mezhdunarodnye ekonomicheskie sviazi. Analiticheskie zapiski IPI*, Issue 2, Erevan, 2008, pp. 134-148 (see also: A. Egiazaryan, *Gruzia: strukturnye problemy ekonomiki i turetskaya ekonomicheskaiia ekspansiia (1994-2007)*, Erevan-Moscow, 2007).

⁶² Quoted from: I. Baramidze, "Kavkazskie riski," *Novye izvestia*, 8 February, 2007, available at [<http://www.newizv.ru/world/2007-02-08/62906-kavkazskie-riski.html>] (see also: [http://www.parliament.ge/print.php?gg=1&sec_id=386&info_id=14749&lang_id=GEO]).

aims. Exploitation of religion is highly unwelcome, very dangerous, and, unfortunately, cannot be excluded.

In any case, religious peace in Ajaria hinges on the ordinary people, many of whom are the descendants of Christians and Muslims, and not on any of the political forces.
