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**Invisible Traces of Islam in the Urban Space of Rustavi:
Interpreting the Religious Diversity in Post-Soviet Georgia**

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Invisible Traces of Islam in the Urban Space of Rustavi: Interpreting the Religious Diversity in Post-Soviet Georgia¹

ABSTRACT

The article discusses the revelation of the religiosity of the Azerbaijani community in the post-Socialist city of Rustavi and their visibility in the urban space. The subject of research is how their religiosity is expressed in the city space. The article pinpoints the attempt by the Muslim community to build a mosque in the city. This unsuccessful try is forgotten by both members of the community- the Azerbaijani and the Christian population. Everyone has forgotten about it, and the topic has become a subject of taboo. In the article, the search for the invisible traces of Islam in the urban space of the city can be linked to two pasts of the city; one is the experience of the Soviet multi-ethnicity and the more distant, historical past of the city interpreted by the Communists. It is also influenced by the peculiarities of the region, the ethno-confessional composition, and the state's attempt to control religious groups and their activities, which has a corresponding impact on the self-perception and self-representation of the Azerbaijani community in the city. Findings presenting in the article based on the ethnographical research done in Rustavi 2019-2020.

Keywords: *Muslim community, public visibility, diversity, religious in urban space*

Introduction

Post-Soviet Georgia inherited ethnic conflicts and ethno-confessional confrontations from the Soviet past. The experience of multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism of the Soviet period in Georgia creates its paradox and at the same time a kind of regularity. Post-Socialist Rustavi interestingly reflects the general opposition to the process of civic integration and understanding of diversity in Georgia. To talk about these issues, I will discuss Rustavi as an exemplary city, a city of “Forty Brothers”, which was returned to the history of Georgia by the Communists. It is interesting how Rustavi manages to deal with diversity in modern reality and to seek roots in history through Orthodox Christianity to re-establish its identity.

The Azerbaijani community is the largest ethno-confessional minority of Rustavi, at the

same time the most well-integrated with the Georgian society. Nevertheless, the Azerbaijani community remains religiously invisible in the city space. It is interesting what determines the self-perception and the position of the Muslim community and how it relates to the city's historical experience.

To present the city, built in the second half of the twentieth century, the Communists offered the public its national and international image, with its supportive narratives. The Soviet experience of Rustavi should be linked to the process of revival of religiosity in the post-Socialist period and the position of the dominant religious group, determinant of ethics and civic boundaries, both inside and outside the city.

As in all of Georgia, the construction of Orthodox churches in Rustavi was linked to the national idea and became an exclusive opportunity to present the past. The national narrative created by the communists was to return to orthodox Christianity or it to appear in the city space. How did the multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism of the city emerge after the collapse of the Soviet Union? How is it possible to connect the international image of the city with religious pluralism and diversity? How was religious diversity formed in the city and how do different religious denominations coexist in the urban space of Rustavi?

The arguments and conclusions presented in the paper are based on the ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Rustavi in 2019-2020, which aimed to research the representations of religiosity in the urban space of the city. The main methods I applied in my fieldwork research, were participant observation and interviews. All my interlocutors, I have interviewed, are from Rustavi and they belong to various religious groups. Apart the empirical study I have done in Rustavi, I also used content analysis method for analyzing various secondary sources.

In this paper, I will discuss the example of Rustavi - how the issue of religiosity was related to the understanding of ethnicity and nation-building in the post-Soviet period (Serrano, 2018; Dragadze, 1993; Pelkmans, 2002). To discuss this issue, I will analyze the construction of the Orthodox church building process in Rustavi and their connection to history and interpretation of the past; how the national narrative was linked to the international representation of the city; how multiculturalism was represented in the urban space of Rustavi. In the next part of the paper, I will also touch on the issue of how labor migration affected the formation of the ethnic composition of the city in post-Soviet time. The question is, what is left in Rustavi from the spirit of friendship between forty brothers and peoples? To discuss these issues, I will discuss the situation of religious minorities in Rustavi and their efforts to establish themselves in the urban space of the city and become part of it. More specifically, I will talk about the Azeri

speaking community. I will attempt to find out what it is like to live in a double minority status in deindustrialized, post-Communist city. What kind of strategy they have adopted to live peacefully in Rustavi?

Thus, in this article I will present the position of the Muslim community in Rustavi, regarding religious visibility in the public space and their position to keep themselves invisible, which is due to the Soviet interpretation of the past on the one hand, and the fear of new Islamic movements such as Wahhabism and Salafism on the other. A certain factor may be the ethnic and religious composition of the region Kvemo Kartli. Rustavi, as the central city of the region, unites the Azerbaijani villages and districts, where the Islamic religious buildings are presented. Not far from Rustavi, Islamic shrines in Azerbaijani villages are located, where the Muslim population of Rustavi can easily go for worship. Despite the fact that Islam is invisible in the urban space of Rustavi, its factor creates significant characteristics and is transformed in different perceptions and attitudes in both the Azerbaijani and Georgian communities.

Religious Revival in Rustavi

In the deindustrialized city, which has become the bedroom area of Tbilisi, production and industry is practically nonexistent. Most of the population of Rustavi have found a job in the capital and commutes to Tbilisi every day. The city population also migrated in search of work outside the country. Moreover, the city population in the Soviet period exceeded 200,000, while today it is almost halved (Geostatic, 1978, 2014). The major problem for the population is unemployment. In terms of production, Rustavi experiences a serious crisis. Against this background, the massive nature of the construction of Orthodox temples is striking. According to the Georgian Patriarchate web-site, there are 23 functioning churches and 10 churches under construction in Rustavi. It is noteworthy that in Rustavi we find several cases when a chapel was built in a kindergarten building, which was followed by some resistance, as we learn from a conversation with an employee of the city municipality. Due to the fact that the church occupied the considerable space of the kindergarten, both inside and outside, then, it was difficult for the kindergarten to obtain a license because it did not meet the standards (employ of municipality, 2021). Despite the urgency of the issue, the representative of the news agency operating in Rustavi, infoRustavi, said that all news outlets refrained from covering the problem, adding that the issue was quite delicate (infoRustavi, 2020).

It became quite trendy to capture small video about Rustavi. The image clips of Rustavi depict the church construction in the city and present it with Christian symbols mostly.

In addition to the mass construction of Orthodox churches in Rustavi, there is a tendency to arrange chapels in the yards of Rustavi, which is kind of position expressed by the Christian Orthodox population and may indicate domination and hierarchy in public space. Yard chapels best express the iconicity and symbolism of religion. Yard chapels are organized at the expense of mobilized by the neighborhoods and are in the nature of private initiatives. From a functional point of view, it is conditioned by the aesthetic and security side and is not related to any specific ritual practice. It should be noted that yard chapels have become a phenomenon in Rustavi that are less common in other cities. The Rustavi yard chapels can be considered as a tool for the struggle for public space and as a peculiar manifestation of the new order and hierarchy, which to some extent, meets the social and civic demands of the post-Socialist city society.

Exploring Ideas of the Diversity in Rustavi

The city of “Forty Brothers”, one of the most “brand” names of socialist Rustavi, expresses well the communists’ attempt to put the historic city in the service of new values. The idea of multinationalism and internationalism, along with the use of the Russian language, was also promoted by the street names. For example, the name of the streets of Rustavi was echoed in the idea of the friendship of peoples, which Vladimer Kobakhidze talks about in the newspaper article “Brotherhood City”. In his opinion, it was the friendship of peoples that revived Rustavi, one of the oldest and, at the same time, new cities. Here we read about the symbolic expression of this fact:

“How symbolic it is that one of the central squares of Rustavi is called the Friendship of Peoples. Here, a new alley was built this year, which the people of Rustavi call the Alley of Friendship of Peoples” (Kobakhidze, 1973, p. 2).

Thus, the central space of Rustavi was occupied by the Friendship of Peoples' Square, Friendship Street and also Friendship Alley.

We find the widest propaganda of the Soviet system in the print media. Political texts that became a template were often repeated without an alteration in various newspapers.

Many other newspaper articles are devoted to the discussion of Rustavi streets, such as Rem Davidov's “Streets of Friendship” and the newspaper “Village Life”. According to the author, just listing the streets will be enough to present their content. He pinpoints the Square of Friendship of the Peoples of the USSR, the streets of Peace, Labor, Young Specialists and First

Builders, among others. He also mentions the street of Donetsk Metallurgists, which is distinguished by its beauty and shows the friendship with the Ukrainian people from the recent history of the city. The names of Sumgait Metallurgists and Cherkasy Streets are also a reflection of the city's recent past, that time.

Correspondent of the newspaper *The Communist*, Z. Merkviladze, in his newspaper article "Friendship City" recalls the history of the founding of the city, which coincides with the course of World War II. He notes that modern Rustavi is called the City of Friendship and this truth is reflected in the fact that the city is represented by 40 different nationalities. The article goes on to give a detailed description of which echelon came from which city for the respective mission. He cites one document to illustrate the involvement of people in the Rustavi construction:

"One interesting document is kept in the Transcaucasian Metallurgical Archive. The passing of time has yellowed and faded it, but you can still read the surnames. This is the salary list of the first builders in Rustavi. The surnames listed in this document are a clear confirmation that Azerbaijanis and Russians, Ukrainians and Armenians, Belarusians and Moldovans, Kazakhs and Lithuanians came here together with Georgians on the scaffoldings of the new city" (Merkviladze, 1967, p. 3).

In this case, it is noteworthy that the author of the article bases this "widely" accepted information on the international nature of the city with a document that has already become historical, which he offers as a historical source preserved in the archives. He completes the article with a description of Rustavi, which is expressed by the noise of the factory pipes and the deafening aggregates. This picture, for the author, best expresses the heartbeat of friendship between the peoples of industrial Rustavi.

The November 10, 1972 issue of the newspaper "Socialist Rustavi" is entirely dedicated to the celebration of the anniversary of the October Revolution. The first page shows an article with the caption: "In a United, Brotherly Family", which describes the solemn procession held in Tbilisi, where, of course, Rustavi, with its considerable representation, also took part. In this case, the focus is on the title of the article, which refers to the closest form of human relations - the family, which is at the same time united and fraternal. This article is followed by a description of a similar event in the city of Rustavi, entitled "Celebrations in the City of Brotherhood and Friendship." In the same issue we find the article: "The City of Peace and Friendship", where the texts that have already become chrestomathy are repeated many times about the united efforts of the people, who performed a "miracle":

“It is the tireless work of these enthusiasts and their colleagues that has made Rustavi the pride of the Republic, space for workers of more than forty nationalities, a city of peace and friendship ...” (Ghvaberia, 1972, p. 2).

Thus, Rustavi is presented as a place for labor, the ultimate goal of which is peace and friendship between peoples. This narrative is so well formulated that it is found axiomatically in virtually every text about the city.

As for the post-Socialist period, the disintegration of the industrial profile of the city was followed by the massive migration of the population from the city. Especially the outflow of ethnic non-Georgian population should have taken place, which is also indicated by the census 3. This process naturally influenced the ethnic composition of the city and the region, and perhaps it is this factor that mostly influences the modern religious processes of the city as well. The population of the city was practically halved, the main part being the representatives of different ethnic groups, which created the multicultural environment of the city. What we are observing in Rustavi, the national narrative of the city created by the communists lost its urgency, and its international image lost its credibility (Kamushadze, 2018). In the post-Socialist period, we see some attempts to present the multicultural face of the city by arranging a square of friendship dedicated to Heydar Aliyev and the People. However, the public attitude towards this event showed that the mentioned presentation of the city is irrelevant and the government looks weak as an interpreter of the resent past of the city.

Muslim communities in Georgia

Georgia has been surrounded by the Islamic world since the day of its existence. Despite the fact that this religion has a great influence on Georgian culture, its perception is still formed as a “cultural other”, which, in my opinion, is based on the interpretation of the Soviet period. The icons seen as a permanent adversary of Islam were formed during the Soviet period. It is noteworthy that the beliefs formed on the basis of the historical films made during the Soviet period, whether it will be kidnapping or the oppression of the people, are still relevant today. It was the visual icons that had to help people differentiate the enemy from a friend. As part of the same narrative, we can consider the story “Black Monday” by archaeologist Gogi Lomtadze. The author led archeological excavations in Rustavi and later was the director of the Rustavi Historical Museum. He tried to revive the most tragic day in the history of the city based on the discovered archeological material. The author’s main aim was to make the last day of the city as memorable as possible by describing the scenes with fictional characters and cruelty characteristic of the epoch. As we know from history, Rustavi was completely razed

and burned by Berka Khan, a Muslimized Mongol. To further symbolize this fact, the author chose the biggest Christian holiday, the day after Easter, Monday, the day of the dead. It is on this day that a fierce enemy attacks the Christian city, mercilessly destroys it and burns it down.

“They did not get a lot of loot, but there were several bigger, richer cities ahead, and now their greedy and ruthless minds were running there. Rustavi was burning and turning into ash. There was nobody left to put out the fire and save anything” (Lomtadze, 1975, p. 155).

Thus, the demolition of Rustavi as a medieval city is at the hands of the historical enemy, which is marked in the Soviet and post-Soviet period on the basis of religion, Islam. The modern discourse of Rustavi also stands on this dichotomy, we are Georgians and they are infidel, Muslims. “Georgian city” creates and shapes the ethno-demographic picture of the region. The former, communist functionaries of the city explain the importance of an industrial city in post-Socialist Rustavi by the Georgian ethnic component of the city, which affects the overall picture of the region. The former editor of the newspaper „Metallurgy“, in 2013, when talking to me about Rustavi, shows the merit of the communists on the grounds that this region is more Georgian by the construction of Rustavi (Jakhua, 2013). Those who view the activities of the communists differently, blame the concentration of Azerbaijanis on the communists, who additionally brought them from Russia and settled them here (a 45-year-old woman). On the whole, the question is what role Rustavi plays in the Kvemo Kartli region and what factor it creates, how it presents itself to the Georgian society, which is also reflected in religious beliefs.

The Azerbaijani community is the most densely populated in the Kvemo Kartli region. Their layout and Soviet experience, when the language of communication in the country was Russian, created a significant barrier to their post-Soviet civic integration. Despite state-sponsored measures to teach the state language to its citizens, alienation and barriers still remain to be a problem, including on the religious grounds. It should be noted, however, that Azerbaijani civic activists place the least emphasis on religion and are more focused on establishing and protecting their cultural identities. To illustrate, they try to celebrate Novruz Bayram with the most special emphasis, which for them is not a religious but a cultural-traditional holiday. We have also seen attempts to declare this day as a bank holiday, etc. We can also observe their attempt to show their own identity as well as being a part of Georgia while protesting the image clip of this region. The clip prepared by the Kvemo Kartli Governor's Administration presented the culture of the region homogeneously. In response,

they produced an alternative video clip that this group considered to be more inclusive and better reflected the existing reality (Arjevanidze, 2020).

Recently, from 2018-2019, civic activism and interesting cases of self-organization of youth groups have been observed in the Azerbaijani communities of Kvemo Kartli. Such is the case with the platform “Salami”, which aims to strengthen and protect the culture and language of the Azerbaijani community in Georgia. They try to present issues that are aimed at the necessary changes in the community, such as early marriage, kidnapping of a woman, etc. It is noteworthy that they actually have little or no religious issues (Hacıyeva, 2020).

Unlike the youth of the Azerbaijani community of Kvemo Kartli, most of the youth of Pankisi are marked with a religious identity. The marker of their religiosity also finds physical expressions such as wearing the hijab. It is also noteworthy that the Kist population of Pankisi is fully fluent in the Georgian language, and in this regard, there is no problem with their integration into Georgian society. The problem is that a large proportion of Pankisi youth are turning away from traditional Islam and attributing themselves to Salafism or Wahhabism. A huge problem a few years ago was their interest in Islamic State and their migration to Syria (Barkaia & Janelidze, 2018).

Today, Muslims make up 10% of the total population of Georgia. They do not represent a homogeneous group in the country. Muslims differ from each other in ethnicity and religious practice. Muslims living in Adjara are ethnic Georgians and followers of Sunni Islam, while Azerbaijanis living in Kvemo Kartli are mostly followers of the Shiite tradition, although some of them also recognize Sunni and Salafi Islam. Part of the Kists living in Pankisi are followers of traditional Sufi Islam, the other part, mostly young people, follow Salafi and Wahhabi traditions. However, the updated data and the number of followers of each branch of Islam in Georgia are difficult to determine because we do not find differentiation in the general census, unlike Christianity (Abuladze, 2021).

The issue of Muslims in Georgia is closely linked to the idea of nationalism and the issue of “Georgianness” and citizenship. Accordingly, state policy is changing in the wake of developed processes. Matthias Pelkmans, who has been researching the religiosity of the population of Adjara since the early 2000s, speaks of re-Christianization as a painful process of returning to the ancestral faith. In the article published in 2014, he tells us about the paradox that followed the collapse of the Soviet system and freedom of religion on the example of Adjara and Kyrgyzstan. The freedom of post-Soviet religion has shown that “freedom” creates constraints and inequality with new possibilities: „In 2001, the imam of a small town in Adjara, a predominantly Muslim region of Georgia, told me,

“During communism we had more freedom; we still had our own lives. Now, we are losing everything.” (Pelkmans, 2014, p. 3)

According to Pelkmans, the selective nostalgia and memory of the imam of Adjara is related to the fact that in the Soviet era, they remained Muslims, and after independence, when they were given the opportunity to pray in public, the devil plays their game, Islam diminishes. Here we are talking about the fact that “Georgianness” [kartveloba] has been defined by Orthodox terminology since the 90s (Pelkmans, 2014). The Georgian Orthodox Church significantly determines the understanding of Georgians and Georgia, it also marks it in the physical space, which is part of the interpretation of the past and the cultural heritage of the country. According to Serrano (2010), we cannot explain the self-confidence of the Georgian Orthodox Church only by the communist experience, after a long wait to occupy the public space after the private one, it is still mainly political will and the strategic goal is to define the connection between religion and the national identity. It is also determined by the will to mark the territory of the country as Christian. Consequently, the construction of new temples is not merely the opening of a chapel, but is linked to the creation of a national landscape that reflects the important convergence of the religion and the national identity (Serrano, 2010).

The equalization of Orthodoxy with Georgia and the marking of Georgian land with this sign was associated with the greatest severity and resistance by the demand of the Adjara Muslims for a place of worship. Since 2012, there have been several instances of controversy on religious grounds where covert opposition has escalated into open confrontation and has highlighted the shortcomings of state-produced or unproduced policies. It should be noted that open religious controversies in Georgia were related to Adjara Muslims, who are known as eco-migrants in different parts of Georgia. The high-profile religious controversy involves the attempt to set aside a place of worship for the Muslims that the Christian population opposes. Any attempt by Muslims to build a shrine or mark the site is counterproductive. Similar cases occur when the population of a town or village is mixed. Although all conflicts leave room for the theory of conspiracy on religious grounds, the complexity of the issue also points to its depth (Khutsishvili, 2013).

Any controversy on religious grounds leads to an interpretation of history. The most popular issue related to the permit to build a religious building is the construction of a new mosque in Batumi. The mosque needed to be built back in the 90s, however, the decision has not been reached yet and the dispute has even become a topic of legal deliberation.

Sophio Zviadadze, who talks about the fading of Islam in Batumi, discusses the topic in a

broad historical context. Part of this public discussion is the dispute over the restoration of the Aziziye Mosque. This issue was the subject of negotiations between the Georgian and Turkish states in the context of caring for cultural heritage. The essential issue that the researcher is talking about is the issue of interpretation of how the community approaches this or that heritage site. The Aziziye Mosque, the restoration of which would have eliminated the problem of a deficit of shrines in Batumi, on the other hand, could have become a historical site where Georgian Muslims made an unwavering decision to stay within Georgia. Instead, the reconstruction of the historic mosque was linked to expectations and fears and was rejected by the state (Zviadadze, 2021). In order to regulate these and other issues, the state tried to have more control over religious processes and especially Islam. Davit Abuladze calls the support of the state for various Islamic groups since 2011 “Statification”, which facilitates its division into traditional and non-traditional Islam. Part of the continuation of this policy is the establishment of the State Agency for Religious Affairs, the work of which is highly criticized by non-governmental organizations (Parulava, 2016; Liberali, 2018; Dumbadze, 2018; Mikeladze 2020).

Muslim Community in Rustavi

The appointment of an Azerbaijani-speaking citizen of Georgia as a representative of the Agency for Religious Affairs in Kvemo Kartli may indicate the tendency and the policy of the state. Abai Pashayev, who speaks good Georgian, sits in a modest room inside the Rustavi City Hall. I asked him for a meeting on the phone, to which I received generous consent. He politely met me in front of the Rustavi City Hall and invited me to his still unfinished office. After a short conversation, it turned out that he could not answer my questions either formally or informally. Questions related to the activities of the agency and the religious situation in Rustavi, could only be asked officially in writing. When I sent an official letter on his behalf, it turned out that the letter's addressee must have been not him but the head of the agency, from whom I would receive a reply. Moreover, the printed letter was to be delivered to the building of the State Chancellery. As it is clear from the details of this small meeting, the appointment of an ethnic Azerbaijani citizen was only symbolic. In fact, he does not participate in the decision-making. He has no authority to speak on behalf of the agency, or delegate anything. It is noteworthy that he symbolically participates in religious events in the city and represents the agency, however, only on a nominal level. This fact as a whole reflects well the state's attempt at the formal level to make its approach to religious issues inclusive, nevertheless,

devoid of real content.

The majority of Azerbaijanis living in Rustavi are followers of Shiite Islam, although many of them associate religious rituals only with the basic stages of the life cycle, such as birth and death. A religious servant, therefore, only appears in such moments. As I learned from Rustavi Akhund, there was a case when he had served Sunni Azerbaijanis as well. The line between Sunnis and Shiites of the Azerbaijani community has become increasingly blurred since the emergence of Wahhabis in the city. As Rustavi Akhund tells us, now a representative of the Azerbaijani community will tell you that he/she is a Muslim, and that's it (Muhammad, 2020).

The main challenge for modern Rustavi and its interpretation is to find a Muslim community and a place of worship for them in the urban space of the city. The largest ethnic and at the same time the religious minority in Rustavi is the Azerbaijani community. According to GEOSTAT, they amount to about 4% of the city's population. According to these data, they are the largest minority in the city.

There are no mosques or shrines in Rustavi at the moment. Searching for Muslim traces in the city is a serious difficulty as they can be said to be invisible. Moreover, the construction of a Muslim shrine is a taboo. Neither the majority, Orthodox Christians, nor Muslims want to talk openly about this issue. One cannot come across any publicly stated demand for the construction of a Muslim shrine. The Chairman of the State Agency for Religious Affairs, to my question whether they have ever received the request of the Muslim community to build a shrine, answered as follows:

“At this stage, no request has been received from the Muslim community of Georgia regarding the construction of a religious building” (the head of State Agency for Religious Affairs, 2019).

Only from personal conversations do we learn that a Muslim shrine was opened in one of the private houses on Sanapiro Street, although it is not registered as such and obtaining information about it is a serious challenge. Its existence is only at the level of rumors and most of the city population has no information about it. Only a few Rustavi residents have confirmed its existence in the past time. An Azerbaijani girl from Rustavi says that during her school years, she went there several times 7 years ago and she does not even remember which building it was. She says:

“I am not a believer and, therefore, I am less interested in such issues. My parents are not active believers either, we celebrate religious holidays in the family. As a

teenager, I was more religious, I fasted, I was interested in relevant literature ... My father was a little nervous about it, my family was more concerned about me being very religious rather than about not being interested in religion at all (Sally, 2020).

The information about the attempt to build a Muslim shrine and the triggered resistance cannot be found in either the electronic or print media. Neither the representatives of the Azerbaijani community nor the Christian population of the city wants to remember it. In this regard, the city architect responds that he has never heard anything like this, recalling only one case when the New Islamic group members asked to put a sign on the facade of the house, but due to the protest of the local population, they later changed their mind (Architect, 2021). An Azeri young man who considers himself a devout Muslim and is a akhund in the Shiite hierarchy, says that there was indeed a gathering place for Muslims near the Sanapiro street in Rustavi, which was rented, but no information is available about it today. He says that believers gather in different places, in private dwellings, to pray:

“A few days ago, we had some important days for us Shiite Muslims. We remembered Muhammad's grandson for 10 days. Since we do not have a meeting place, we rented a small restaurant and paid 100 GEL a day, what else could we do?” (Muhammad, 2020).

He listed three problems that he thinks the Azerbaijani community has been facing in Rustavi for a long time: the issue of a cemetery for Muslims, a mosque, a place of worship and the lack of a school building. The problem of the cemetery has just been solved; the City Hall allocated a plot of land for this a one year ago.

As for the mosque, he recalls when its construction failed due to the activity of the Orthodox population, they collected signatures and submitted them to the City Hall. It is impossible to find information about this fact, as it has not been widely reported. This fact is remembered by only the part of the population of Rustavi that was a direct witness of the developments. A young student from Rustavi comments on it:

“Rustavi is a colorful city; its diversity is expressed in ethnic and religious variety. There are not a lot of problems, though one was related to the mosque. There is an uninhabited area near my apartment, it is a swampy place and they wanted to build a mosque there, but the Christian population of the surrounding areas protested. The residents of the apartment collected the signatures of the apartments, on the basis

of which the City Hall decided not to give permission build a mosque, thus ending the issue. It would have been 2009 or 2010” (Nino, 2019).

Appearing in public in this way for Muslims is associated with a number of problems. Despite their large numbers, the position is not or cannot be expressed publicly, which may be related to the stereotypical perception of history and the peculiarities of the region. Several factors can explain the absence of a Muslim shrine in Rustavi. First is the high rate of integration of Rustavi Azeris into Georgian society - unlike Marneuli, Dmanisi or Bolnisi Azeris, Rustavi Azeris speak Georgian perfectly. Second, there are many Azerbaijani villages near Rustavi, where you can find Muslim shrines, and, consequently, the believers living in Rustavi mainly go there. Third, Rustavi Azerbaijanis also take into account the negative environment created by the erection of a monument of Heydar Aliyev in Rustavi in 2013. The placement of the monument to Heydar Aliyev on Old Rustavi Friendship Avenue was interpreted by the authorities as a continuation of the tradition of friendship between the people that the city had during the Soviet period, however, it was perceived differently by the population. All in all, the lack of a Muslim shrine in Rustavi does not cause particular anxiety and open resistance among the Azerbaijani population.

The highest religious official in Rustavi, Muhammad, tells me that at the moment he does not think it is right to raise the issue of building a mosque in Rustavi, because there is no time for that yet. However, what he is asking from the government is to control the Wahhabis and Salafis flow and to protect them from their influence. He draws an interesting parallel between Jehovah's Witnesses and the Wahhabis, arguing that just as the Jehovah's Witnesses are a threat to Christianity, the spread of Wahhabism and Salafism is a threat to traditional Islam in Georgia (Muhammad, 2020).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the most interesting issue in Rustavi, still remains to be how the representatives of this or that religious community perceive the existing reality in post-Socialist Rustavi, where and what they see as the problem and how these issues are articulated. What kind of spaces are created for conversations and narratives, where we can observe certain demands for Muslims whether or not they should appear in the city?! What we can see in the city today is, on the one hand, the high integration of the Azerbaijani community, which is due to their fluency in the Georgian language, and the weak articulation of their position, on the other. Although they are the largest religious and ethnic minority in the city, their attempts to

appear in public are less or almost non-existent. This may be related to the perception of Islam in general in the society, as well as to the peculiarity of the region, more precisely, the ethnic and religious composition of Kvemo Kartli. The research showed that part of the young Azerbaijani community living in the city no longer feels the importance of religion, for others it is related to the new Islamic movement, which can be considered in the context of the self-identification of the Azerbaijani community as a whole and the process of civic integration. The Soviet and post-Soviet experience of the city, where the understanding of diversity is different, naturally plays an important role in the self-realization of the Azerbaijani community. Despite the fact that the construction of the city was linked to the joint efforts of the “Forty Brothers” by the communists, in the post-Socialist era, the friendship between peoples is still perceived as an unbelievable value and is associated with more fears and dangers. The sense of danger and resistance for the clergy of the Muslim community of Rustavi is not related to the non-dominant religious group and the Christian population of the city, but to the new radical movement of Islam and their expansion. The emergence of this problem can be considered as a manifestation of state policy as the State Agency for Religious Affairs cooperates and funds only religious groups traditionally considered in Georgia. Thus, it is practically impossible to search for the manifestation of Islam in Rustavi, but its presence is an important factor for both Georgian and Azerbaijani communities in the city.

NOTES

1. This research was supported by Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia (SRSFG) grant N - YS- 19-521
2. We can see some such clips on YouTube, all of them start with panoramic views and a giant iron cross on Iaghluji Mountain, then there is a monument of Shota Rustaveli and the view of the city, as well as a historic castle and Orthodox temples.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6Nn5gEWI fU>
3. According to the negotiations between Georgia and the Turkish state in 2011, the Turkish side would allow Georgians to participate in the rehabilitation of the Khazhti, Oshki, Ishkhani and Otkhtavi churches on its territory. The negotiations failed due to the position of the Georgian Patriarchate.
4. Official GEOSTAT data vary, as the city’s Akhud told us the population of Azerbaijan should exceed 10,000.

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